



Discussion Paper
March 2021

COVID-19 and Its Effect on Inequality and Democracy

A Study of Five Large Democracies

Joshua Kurlantzick

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INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on public health in most countries, but it has caused particular destruction in five of the most populous and powerful democracies in the world: the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. These states have five of the highest death tolls and caseloads from COVID-19 of any countries, and all have struggled to control the pandemic.¹ Democracy itself is not the reason for their public health failures. Other democracies, from consolidated and wealthy ones such as Germany and Taiwan to politically shaky and middle-income ones such as Thailand, have developed effective responses that have minimized the virus's toll.² Some democracies, such as Australia and Canada, have not only produced effectual public health responses but also taken robust measures to mitigate the pandemic's effect on inequality.³ Several authoritarian states, such as Vietnam, have adopted policies that curtailed the virus's spread; other authoritarian states, including Iran and Russia, have failed in managing the pandemic.⁴

Instead, the vast social and economic inequalities in these five ethnically and racially diverse countries have made the pandemic harder to control. These states have failed to handle the novel coronavirus in part because they have never addressed their historical internal divides, which COVID-19 has brutally revealed. In addition, leaders in these states who have attacked political systems and social cohesion have hindered the pandemic response.⁵

Beyond revealing inequalities and devastating public health, the pandemic has had two dangerous effects in all of these countries: COVID-19 actually has made socioeconomic inequality worse, possibly for years to come, and has significantly exacerbated democratic regression.

In these five states, caseloads and death tolls of the novel coronavirus are falling hardest on racial, ethnic, and sometimes religious minorities and on the poor; poor and minority communities significantly overlap, and many of these same citizens have the preexisting conditions that make them more susceptible to getting extremely sick or dying from COVID-19.⁶ The pandemic seems to be further entrenching economic and social inequalities, and some leaders are passing pandemic-era measures that could further hurt poor and minority groups.⁷ Furthermore, as often has happened during past major emergencies, political leaders have taken advantage of the emergency to corrode democratic norms and institutions—in these five democracies and across the globe.⁸

Yet the coronavirus pandemic, like many other past crises, simultaneously has caused this damage and offered the chance for societies to pull together and think big about potential policy reforms. Some politicians are finding that promoting major policy reforms in the wake of the devastating pandemic could boost their popularity and win support across the political aisle; in some smaller democracies, such as New Zealand, politicians who have fostered societal unity and equality and embraced major reforms during the pandemic have won electoral victories.⁹ Although no solution will be one-size-fits-all in these five democracies, policymakers could utilize the emergency of the pandemic to promote large-scale structural reforms to reverse democratic regression and address aspects of socioeconomic inequality. Because these five countries are among the biggest and most powerful democracies in the world, any steps they take to address their inequalities and combat democratic regression will set examples for states around the world. Yet, if they allow COVID-19 to worsen inequality and accelerate democratic backsliding, they will set examples for other countries as well.

BIG DEMOCRACIES, BIG PROBLEMS

Although they have widely varying histories—and the United States and India have longer democratic traditions than the other three—the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines were considered stable democracies by the early 2010s. All five countries had held multiple free and fair elections and enjoyed peaceful transfers of power to opposition politicians.¹⁰ Yet despite being relatively stable, these large democratic countries also had high levels of socioeconomic inequality—and recent leaders who rejected their political systems. Comparing the responses of these countries to the coronavirus yields some common and interesting lessons.

The historical factors that link income inequality and minorities are not exactly the same in each of these states. The United States' and Brazil's histories of slavery still shape their societies and economies, while India's caste system and long colonial rule fostered inequality and divisions. The Philippines retains a legacy of wealth concentration dating back to the era of Spanish colonialism; following Spanish rule, a small group of Philippine elites captured a large share of the economy.¹¹ In Indonesia, the long Suharto dictatorship created consistent, strong growth and fostered some economic equality but also created kleptocratic monopolies in many industries. In the post-Suharto era, those monopolies dominate many sectors of the economy, and inequality has skyrocketed.¹²

Today, they all suffer sizable inequality. The United States is the most economically unequal of the seven developed states in the Group of Seven. Brazil is one of the most economically unequal countries in Latin America, despite efforts by a succession of Brazilian governments to use cash transfers and other programs to combat inequality, and the Philippines also has high income inequality.¹³

Indonesia and India both face sharply rising income inequality.¹⁴ In these diverse countries, ethnic, religious, and racial minorities are overrepresented among the poor and often suffer from lower life expectancies, less access to health care and education, and higher rates of incarceration than people from majority groups.

Many recent political leaders in these countries passed measures prior to the onset of COVID-19 that only deepened inequality, which ultimately made responding to the pandemic harder. The Donald J. Trump administration, for instance, repeatedly sought to undermine the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which has helped expand access to health insurance, particularly among minorities and the poor. (The Supreme Court's decision on the case will be released in 2021.) Overturning the ACA would result in over twenty-one million mostly lower-income Americans losing health insurance.¹⁵ The Trump administration also took a hard-line approach to policing and voting rights, refusing to countenance police reforms and trying to undermine voting rights in numerous ways. The effects of this voter suppression have fallen hardest on the poor and minorities.¹⁶ In the Philippines, the Rodrigo Duterte government's "war" on drugs, which has largely consisted of state-sanctioned extrajudicial killings, has taken an outsized toll on impoverished Filipinos. Though Duterte has claimed the drug "war" would target powerful drug dealers, a comprehensive study by Amnesty International found that the "war" was disproportionately targeting the poor and called it a "large-scale murdering enterprise."¹⁷

Recent leaders in these large democracies also used public rhetoric to divide and polarize societies, often further harming minority groups. On Twitter, President Trump routinely claimed that politicians of color such as Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams and New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez were unqualified for office and should be feared; he also routinely demonized Latinx immigrants and other minorities as dangers to the United States.¹⁸ Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has claimed that indigenous Brazilians are only now "evolving [into] humans" and complained that Brazilian cavalry had not wiped out more indigenous peoples during the conquest of the Brazilian interior.¹⁹ Bolsonaro's demonization of indigenous people and evisceration of protections for the Amazon Rainforest have contributed to a wave of illegal mining and foresting and a spike in violence against indigenous people in the Amazon basin.²⁰ Several of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's closest allies, including Yogi Adityanath, chief minister of the massive

state Uttar Pradesh, have called the Indian Muslim community, which comprises some two hundred million people, a “virus” within the country.²¹ The condemnation of Muslims by prominent members of Modi’s party combined with the Modi administration’s failure to control anti-Muslim violence has contributed to a rising wave of anti-Muslim hate crimes.²²

INEQUALITY HAMPER EFFORTS AGAINST COVID-19

The deep economic and social inequality in the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines has hampered their pandemic responses throughout. Because many of those democratic countries have health-care systems that function ineffectively for lower-income people, including many minorities, hospitals and other facilities have quickly become overwhelmed when the virus spreads to poorer areas of the countries—where people are more likely to catch COVID-19 anyway, since they cannot work remotely. In places such as the rural upper Midwest of the United States, Brazil's inner cities or poor province Amazonas, and India's poorest neighborhoods, overwhelmed hospitals and other health-care settings cannot contain the virus, which allows COVID-19 to spread even faster. The cycle then repeats, and, since many lower-income people do not stay in one area—in India, for instance, poor people have migrated across the country since COVID-19 struck, looking for work—they then spread the virus and hamper any national response.

Policies that deepened inequality often made the situation worse. The Trump administration's campaign against the ACA, for instance, combined with some Republican-led states' refusal to expand Medicaid to allow their poorer citizens to access the ACA, kept the number of uninsured Americans high and hindered the pandemic response.²³ The general lack of sick leave in the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines for lower-income workers, who often work in the informal sector, has meant that, throughout the pandemic, poorer men and women often keep working even when they know they could have been infected, since they cannot afford to lose their jobs.²⁴

Historical inequality is also hindering the vaccine rollout in many of these countries, even though vaccination campaigns are now the best weapon for ultimately controlling the pandemic. Many minority

populations in the United States harbor deep distrust of government public health efforts, due to the lasting effects of systemic racism and a history of the U.S. government conducting illegal experiments on minorities (such as the Tuskegee study, in which Black men with syphilis were denied treatment to study the disease's effects) and demonstrating disinterest in issues that damage minorities' public health (such as the water crisis in Flint, Michigan). A study of views of vaccination conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found massive skepticism of the COVID-19 vaccine among Black Americans, with nearly 50 percent saying they will not take a vaccine "even if scientists deem it safe and it is available for free to anyone who wants it."²⁵ A study by the Pew Research Center found similarly high rates of vaccine skepticism among Black and Latinx Americans.²⁶ Such distrust makes vaccinating enough people to reach herd immunity difficult.

Even if minority groups in the United States want to get vaccinated, the chaotic, decentralized, and often internet-centered nature of the U.S. vaccine rollout has often made it easier for wealthier, white Americans to find appointments and get vaccinated. Multiple studies show that Black Americans are getting vaccinated at much lower rates than white Americans, even though COVID-19 has taken a higher toll proportionally among the Black population, and that even in poorer, minority-dominated neighborhoods, high percentages of vaccines are going to white, wealthier Americans (often from other neighborhoods), who have the cars, internet access, and time to travel to poorer neighborhoods and enroll for vaccination.²⁷ This lack of equitable vaccination undermines the whole vaccination effort, since the United States needs a high number of Americans, including minorities, to get vaccinated to foster herd immunity.

The recent political leaders in the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines—who all came to power as anti-system politicians and have regularly disdained expertise, including that of epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists—have also complicated the pandemic response. Trump, for instance, repeatedly mocked scientific consensus on effective measures to control the pandemic, adding chaos and confusion to the response effort and polarizing the public in ways that made it harder to develop anti-COVID-19 public health campaigns.²⁸ Bolsonaro also has denigrated scientific expertise throughout the pandemic, polarizing the response and undermining public health efforts. Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Indonesian President Joko Widodo, known as Jokowi, have promoted unproven treatments for COVID-19, such as herbal remedies and the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine, and sometimes mocked scientific consensus on how to address the pandemic.²⁹ Bolsonaro continues to mock the vaccine efforts, saying that he himself will absolutely not get vaccinated—a presidential message that will hamper vaccination progress in a country that historically had been known for effective public health campaigns against diseases such as the Zika virus.³⁰ Indeed, the number of Brazilians who said they would not get vaccinated, almost surely influenced by Bolsonaro’s vaccine skepticism, more than doubled in the last six months of 2020.³¹

THE PANDEMIC EXPOSES FLAWS AND EXACERBATES PROBLEMS

The pandemic has further exposed the dysfunction in these five populous and powerful democracies. It has entrenched economic and social inequalities and sped up democratic regression.

COVID-19 ENTRENCHES INEQUALITY

The five recent leaders' rhetoric and policies, combined with their states' histories of inequality, have ensured the pandemic hits minorities and the poor harder than middle-class, wealthy, and racial, religious, and ethnic majority citizens. In many ways, COVID-19 has deepened inequality in these countries.

The pandemic has entrenched inequality in multiple ways. Simply by killing more poor people and minority citizens per capita in these countries, COVID-19, along with ineffective government management of the pandemic, has fragmented poor and minority families, leaving them with fewer potential wage-earners for the future and potentially more financially strained than wealthier peers—who often have better insurance—by health-care costs during the pandemic. Death tolls for the poor are much higher per capita than for wealthier citizens in all of these countries.³² To take one example, American Indian reservations have had some of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks and death tolls, in part because they have been underfunded for decades by the federal government but also because the Trump administration for months excluded American Indian tribes from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the major COVID-related stimulus bill.³³

Leaders' policies have exacerbated wide disparities in suffering from the pandemic with lasting effects. Bolsonaro's government

dismantled the Ministry of Cities, which could have helped provide COVID-19–related assistance to the poorest parts of Brazilian urban areas. The government also has done little to shore up Brazil’s decrepit public health system, which primarily serves the poor (whereas wealthier Brazilians access private providers).³⁴

Hunger caused by the pandemic reinforces inequality too—it makes it more difficult for children to learn and contributes to lasting health problems. Black and Latinx households in the United States have found it harder to feed their families during the pandemic than white families.³⁵

LABOR MARKETS

The novel coronavirus’s effects on the labor market will have lasting effects on socioeconomic inequality. Many prior economic shocks, such as the 2008–09 Great Recession, left lasting scars that widened inequality over the subsequent decade. Now, as pandemic-related unemployment rises, the biggest job losses have been concentrated in low-wage industries heavily staffed by minorities and the poor—industries that also usually are more exposed to health risks than those staffed by higher-income Americans.³⁶ Minority-owned U.S. small businesses have suffered disproportionate economic losses during the pandemic, in part because they were already less financially secure than white-owned businesses and in part because the federal government’s plan to aid small businesses often helped larger companies instead of truly small firms.³⁷ Women have also suffered disproportionately, often taking on the extra child care required when schools shut down. Overall, a study by the *Washington Post* of the COVID-19–induced recession found that this appears to be the most unequal in modern U.S. history, “delivering a mild setback for those at or near the top and a depression-like blow for those at the bottom, according to a *Washington Post* analysis of job losses across the income spectrum.”³⁸ Given this disparity, job losses in the United States are likely to be longer-lasting in lower-wage and service industries than in higher-wage industries, where workers can easily transition to remote work and which are more likely to recover quickly as the pandemic wanes.

In the other four big democracies, the labor market story is similar. All of these large democracies suffered huge drops in economic output in 2020. The Philippines suffered its largest economic contraction on record, Indonesia weathered its first contraction in two decades, and India’s economy shrank nearly 10 percent last year.³⁹ Overall, the World Bank estimates that the pandemic will drive some 150 million people

around the world into extreme poverty by 2021, and previous pandemics suggest that COVID-19 will have long-enduring economic effects.⁴⁰ Though these five large democracies are not among the world's poorest states, on a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita basis, the prolonged economic downturns combined with the concentration of job losses in sectors dominated by minorities and the poor will damage the job prospects, income, and health of these people for years to come.

In Brazil, for instance, where unemployment was already high before the onset of the pandemic, research suggests that COVID-19 could have lasting effects on employment and poverty if policymakers do not address the fallout with substantial economic programs.⁴¹ COVID-19 has made 83 percent of Brazilians insecure in their ability to keep their jobs—insecurity that falls hardest on poorer Brazilians.⁴² Similarly, in India, the pandemic could cause economic dislocation for poorer Indians for years. Many poorer Indians had moved from rural areas to major cities in search of work in recent decades. During the pandemic, these migrant workers often have been the first to lose their jobs and have returned home en masse, but they have been unable to find stable employment in rural areas that have little work and face structural barriers and frequent droughts.⁴³

Furthermore, political leaders in many of these democracies have scapegoated the poor and minorities during COVID-19, which has caused direct physical harm and also potentially discouraged employers from hiring them, hindering the economic prospects of the poor and minority groups. In India, for example, leading politicians in Modi's ruling party have pushed conspiracy theories blaming Muslims for spreading COVID-19, despite a lack of evidence.⁴⁴ These polarizing conspiracy theories have consequences: they almost surely have contributed to a spike in attacks on Muslims in India and could push many Muslims out of the economy's informal sector, costing them jobs and income.⁴⁵ They will be unlikely to regain these jobs, as India's entire economy is cratering; it has suffered one of the worst contractions of any large economy, forcing hundreds of millions back into poverty.⁴⁶

WEALTH AND ASSETS

The pandemic will also exacerbate inequality in terms of who controls wealth and assets in the United States. Since the poor and minorities in the United States already control far less wealth and assets than wealthier and white Americans, this extended dent to the job market will further widen inequalities of wealth. The U.S. stock market indexes,

important sources of wealth for middle- and upper-class Americans, have rebounded from their pandemic lows, but most lower-income Americans own little or no stock—a Federal Reserve study showed only one-third of the poorest 50 percent of Americans own any stock at all.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the pandemic is draining lower- and lower-middle-income Americans' wealth and assets, and they are benefiting little from the rise in the stock market. The poor and minority groups in the United States are also more likely to lose their homes during the pandemic, costing them what is often their most valuable asset.⁴⁸

SCHOOLING AND CHILDREN

Meanwhile, the poorest children have suffered the most from the switch to mostly remote schooling in the United States and some of these other large democracies; the dramatic effect of the pandemic on schooling will further entrench inequality in these countries, hurting poorer children for the rest of their lives. About half of all American children are still doing only remote learning, which has proven far less effective than in-person education, especially for poorer students with limited access to computers and internet and with parents who do not have jobs with the freedom to work at home and monitor remote schooling. By contrast, wealthier, more equal, and better-run democracies such as those in Australia, New Zealand, and Europe are providing more in-person schooling than the United States and have generally found ways to make in-person school safe.⁴⁹

A much higher percentage of poor American children are learning remotely than wealthier children, whose parents can pay for them to attend in-person private schools, hire tutors, or take other measures to create in-person education, and this disparity will have lifetime effects.⁵⁰ A study by McKinsey & Company found that some low-income students will fall behind peers by roughly a year of learning due to the effects of COVID-19 and closed schools.⁵¹ The education gap between poorer children doing only remote school and wealthier children doing in-person school will permanently inhibit poorer children's earnings as adults.⁵²

In India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and other developing nations, remote school is even less effective, particularly for poorer children, sizeable percentages of whom have no internet access at all.⁵³ A World Bank study suggested that some 1.6 billion children, mostly in developing countries, have faced school closures due to COVID-19.⁵⁴ In these developing countries, the pandemic-era period in which poor children

get virtually no instruction could be even more detrimental to their lifetime earnings than for poor children in the United States.

COVID-19 FOSTERS DEMOCRATIC REGRESSION

Recent leaders of these large democracies, like many of their peers in the COVID-19 era, have used the pandemic to expand their executive power. These five men vary in the nature of their illiberalism and how they have used the pandemic to further centralize power. They range from Duterte, who oversees emergency measures close to outright authoritarianism, to Jokowi, the most reluctant of the five to compromise democratic norms. And each leader's damage to democracy has been limited by the strength—or weakness—of his country's institutions. Norms and institutions have been harder to undermine for Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro than for Duterte; the United States and India have longer democratic traditions and stronger political bulwarks, and Brazil's courts and at times its congress have held Bolsonaro back.

Still, all five have attacked institutions such as independent judiciaries, bureaucracies, civil societies, electoral apparatuses, and the media. These governments have also often stepped up attacks on norms and institutions during the pandemic, when civil society groups have had more trouble holding demonstrations and citizens are distracted by their own (reasonable) fears for their health and their families. Duterte has closed news outlets such as leading Philippine broadcaster ABS-CBN, and his allies in the Philippine legislature have given the president vast emergency powers, ostensibly to fight the novel coronavirus. Under a new law, the government has the authority to arrest people without warrants.⁵⁵ Modi's administration has politicized India's courts and used the coronavirus to further repress the Indian media, already cowed by pressure from Modi's party and businesses that favor the prime minister.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the Trump administration stepped up its campaign against nominally independent inspector generals within government agencies during the pandemic and increasingly kept cabinet heads in their positions without congressional approval and against the law, among other efforts.⁵⁷ (The new Joe Biden administration has promised to restore institutions and norms, but whether it can fix much of the damage remains unclear.) Though less illiberal than the others, Jokowi has overseen a crackdown on civil society criticism of the government, couched as preventing criticism of the government's COVID-19 response. Jokowi's administration also has increasingly

revived the use of armed forces in domestic affairs, including in the pandemic battle, raising fears of authoritarianism in a country where, during the long Suharto dictatorship, armed forces played central, and often brutal, roles in domestic politics.⁵⁸ The Jokowi administration has furthermore enacted emergency powers during the pandemic that have reduced the independence of local and regional governors.⁵⁹

These five large democracies are symbolic of larger trends, as the pandemic has caused democratic regression in much of the world. Yet these countries' trajectories carry special weight regionally and internationally because they head some of the largest democracies in the world. A 2020 study by Freedom House revealed that the pandemic had "deepened a crisis for democracy around the world, providing cover for governments to disrupt elections, silence critics and the press, and undermine the accountability needed to protect human rights as well as public health." This research showed that the condition of rights and democracy had worsened in eighty countries since the onset of the pandemic.⁶⁰ The Economist Intelligence Unit's annual index of global democracy, released in February, had strikingly similar findings to Freedom House's study. It reported that "around the world in 2020, citizens experienced the biggest rollbacks of individual freedoms ever undertaken by governments during peacetime" and that democracy globally was at its weakest point of any time since the index was launched in 2006.⁶¹

RECONCILIATION AND REFORM

Despite all the gloom, the history of other major shocks such as natural disasters, recessions or depressions, and prior waves of disease suggests that such events, if addressed through effective policymaking, can foster societal reconciliation and prompt dramatic political and economic reforms. A recent study from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace shows how shocks such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 2011 Fukushima reactor disaster in Japan promoted political and societal reconciliation.⁶²

Conversely, extensive historical evidence suggests that when handled poorly major emergencies can increase distrust of government, societal and political polarization, inequality, and the emergence of authoritarian, illiberal leaders. Past emergencies that were not effectively addressed by policymakers, such as the Great Depression, did not end well. In many countries, the depression fostered intense political polarization, popular disaffection with democracy, embrace of authoritarianism, and ultimately the largest and deadliest interstate conflicts in human history.

In some smaller democracies, the current pandemic has already sparked attempts at societal and political reconciliation. Politicians in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and South Korea, among other countries, have united in developing strategies to address COVID-19 and used the threat of the pandemic to address polarization and promote equality. Promoting unity and addressing inequality have proven politically popular, and politicians usually gravitate to strategies that help them maintain popularity and win elections. Ontario Premier Doug Ford, a previously polarizing politician, has earned high levels of trust across the political aisle by offering clear and transparent leadership and working with policymakers from a broad range of parties

during the emergency.⁶³ South Korean President Moon Jae-in, while overseeing an effective COVID-19 response, has taken advantage of greater national unity to attempt to reduce the intensity of the country's left-right political divide. In South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa has purposefully taken advantage of the greater unity sparked by COVID-19 to promote national reconciliation and combat polarization and inequality.⁶⁴ And in New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has combined an effective approach to contain COVID-19 with a drumbeat of rhetorical messaging emphasizing New Zealanders' unity. She was rewarded in October 2020 with the biggest electoral victory in modern New Zealand history.⁶⁵

THE WAY FORWARD

The five large democracies of the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines are plagued by massive political, economic, and social problems. These challenges have been exacerbated by polarizing and often ineffective top leadership, both before and during the pandemic. The enormity and deep roots of these problems mean they cannot be solved rapidly or easily. Any list of ideas for progress can only be a jumping-off point; some experts on U.S. politics, for instance, believe political polarization, socioeconomic inequality, and the breakdown of social cohesion have become so bad that the country's politics are unsalvageable and the United States has essentially become ungovernable.⁶⁶

Yet effective governance has both policy and political rewards, even for highly polarizing leaders. It bolsters leaders' popularity and potentially their election prospects. The severe effects of the crisis, meanwhile, offer an opportunity for leaders to go big in response and push major reforms to address their countries' deep economic and political challenges. Many of these reforms should create a policy agenda focused on what Jacob Hacker of Yale University terms "predistribution"—putting measures in place that address inequality and making growth more inclusive from the bottom up, beyond taxing people.⁶⁷

Overall, leaders should consider the following reforms:

- ***Take advantage of the fleeting unity created by COVID-19 to aggressively promote national reconciliation and public trust.*** Even in these five large and highly polarized democracies, polling suggests that a significant percentage of people want to overcome polarization in dealing with COVID-19—and possibly in combating broader issues of inequality as well. For example, despite the United States' seemingly

bitter COVID-19–related partisanship, polling has shown that Americans generally want to work together to address the virus and that a significant majority of Americans share views about the best ways to address COVID-19.⁶⁸ More broadly, research by the organization More in Common suggests that, across multiple countries, “the pandemic has created a new sense of togetherness” and some common desire to work together to solve problems and rebuild public trust, which is essential to government functioning, in a pandemic or in normal times.⁶⁹

Policymakers in these five countries should take advantage of this moment, playing on societal desires for unity to promote national reconciliation and reduce polarization, as leaders such as Ramaphosa and Moon already have done in smaller democracies. Leaders such as Bolsonaro or Modi are certainly not guaranteed to do so. Some populist policymakers in the United States, Brazil, and India already have used the pandemic to whip up further polarization and undermine public trust in government and all kinds of expertise. However, these attempts at using the pandemic to polarize have hurt countries’ pandemic responses and can ultimately backfire electorally. The Trump administration’s mishandling and polarization of the pandemic, for instance, played a role in Trump’s reelection loss. U.S. incumbent presidents are rarely defeated, and a study released after the election by political science professors Leonardo Baccini, Abel Brodeur, and Stephen Weymouth suggested that with even a modestly more effective response to the pandemic and its recessionary effects Trump could have won reelection.⁷⁰ By contrast, both Democratic and Republican U.S. governors who have urged unity and developed relatively effective responses to the pandemic have earned high approval ratings from both Democratic and Republican partisans.⁷¹

Rhetorically, policymakers in these five leading democracies should emphasize how polling demonstrates that significant majorities of people want to work together, are tired of polarization, fear that a breakdown into political tribalism could lead to greater authoritarianism and outright violence, and have many common policy goals. Their efforts at promoting reconciliation should emphasize that these approaches stem from grassroots support, not from top-down mandates.

- ***Push for systemic, democratizing reforms of political systems and electoral systems, and punish actors who aggressively promote polarization.*** This could include promoting ranked-choice voting, public financing of campaigns, and the drawing of fair, representative districts for state and federal elections, among other measures.

The Biden administration has embraced comprehensive governance reforms designed to bolster voting rights and curtail partisan gerrymandering, which tends to dilute the power of minority voters.⁷²

Policymakers should also take aggressive, punishing steps against actors who seek to use the crisis to promote polarization and target minority groups. These steps could include legislative and executive pressure on social media platforms to crack down on violent rhetoric and efforts to punish politicians who stoke hatred against minority groups or generally promote polarizing and antidemocratic actions. Such punishments could include having party leaders remove them from important assignments or banish them from the party altogether, serving as powerful messages to other actors. For instance, after Republican Michigan State Representative Gary Eisen hinted in December 2020 at trying to foment violence during the meeting of Michigan's presidential electors, the Michigan Republican Party stripped him of his committee assignments.⁷³ It was a modest response given that the state legislative session was coming to a close. If they want to reduce polarization and rebuild public trust, political parties and party leaders will have to take stronger, tougher measures in response to members who try to polarize and promote antidemocratic actions. Ultimately, though, it will be up to voters to punish the most polarizing politicians at the ballot box, which could prompt political leaders to become more compromising and moderate.

- ***Use the emergency to promote new, groundbreaking policy thinking that can combat rising inequality.*** Emergencies can spark new thinking on all manner of policies. COVID-19 has laid bare these five countries' massive inequalities and political weaknesses—to publics and even to many policymakers who had ignored their countries' deeply ingrained problems. Several leaders in these five major democracies have embraced dramatic reforms they previously had opposed—whether because they genuinely had a change of heart or because they feared losing office if they did not shift tactics.

In India, Modi and the ruling party have pushed forward some of the most comprehensive economic reforms in decades, partly in response to the economic devastation wrought by COVID-19, which has forced the Indian economy into a major contraction.⁷⁴ In the United States, President Biden, historically a centrist Democrat, ran in the 2020 election on the most progressive platform in modern Democratic Party history amid the pandemic and nationwide protests for racial justice and has already put forward bold proposals on

reforming immigration, addressing COVID-19's impact on public health, combating child poverty and economic inequality, and stimulating the economy. The Democratic Party's platform included vows to quadruple government spending on low-income housing and dramatically expand other social welfare initiatives, including by creating a public option for health insurance.⁷⁵ In March, the Democratic-controlled House and Senate passed and President Biden signed a \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill, which contained a massive new program to address child poverty in the longer term as well as measures to help schools, state and local governments, and other hard-hit communities and individuals in the shorter term.⁷⁶ On the other side of the aisle, some Republican politicians and thought leaders, including Florida Senator Marco Rubio and Utah Senator Mitt Romney, have noted the United States' increasing dysfunction and embraced major reforms in response, including new types of industrial policy, efforts to reduce child poverty and inequality, and measures to reduce monopolies in certain sectors.⁷⁷ Rubio and Romney are not alone. Some conservative think tanks, research institutions, and publications have demonstrated greater acceptance of new, breakthrough thinking on addressing the United States' deep-rooted economic problems. For instance, the populist conservative publication *American Affairs*, which originally identified itself as supportive of Trump but since has shifted to more broadly promoting right-leaning populism, has embraced ideas such as reining in monopolies, advancing a modern industrial policy, and other major reforms designed to boost growth and address inequality in the United States.⁷⁸

Other policymakers in these five democracies should reflect on the emergency and respond to the pandemic with major reforms designed to lessen social and economic inequality. Rhetorically, leaders and opposition politicians should embrace the boldest, most far-reaching economic reforms possible, designed to both cushion the immediate emergency and make growth more equitable. After all, periods in which economic growth is both high and broad tend to be eras in which political compromise is easier and political tribalism ebbs. As sociologist Jack A. Goldstone and scientist Peter Turchin note in a recent paper on the United States' polarization, the United States built a cooperative and trusting society in part from shared growth in the past, especially in the period between the 1930s and the 1970s. Now, however, they argue that U.S. politics has shifted (as has politics in countries such as Brazil and the Philippines) and elite political leaders increasingly "seek to win support from the working classes not by sharing the wealth or

by expanding public services and making sacrifices to increase the common good, but by persuading the working classes that they are beset by enemies who hate them ... and want to take away what little they have. This pattern builds polarization and distrust and is strongly associated with civil conflict, violence and democratic decline,” clearly seen in U.S. politics in recent months.⁷⁹

- ***Use every possible economic measure to mitigate the economic damage caused by the pandemic and address the ways in which COVID-19 is further entrenching inequality.*** Governments should provide as much stimulus as possible, ideally via cash transfer programs, leaving concerns about the eventual effects on debt and national budgets for another day, especially given that interest rates remain so low in many countries. Such large-scale cash transfer programs would help reduce the lasting economic harm of the pandemic on the poorest citizens and could have significant benefits in addressing inequality. They also should take advantage of rising popular support for expanding public health insurance, sparked in part by the pandemic, to broaden national health insurance programs whenever possible. This approach would have an outsized effect on the poor and many minority groups and could also reduce socioeconomic inequality. Policymakers should use the opportunity of the pandemic to open up domestic markets, such as India’s agricultural market, that are mired in bureaucracy and could provide new jobs in a time of mass unemployment among the poor. Modi already has pushed for reforms, touted as the most comprehensive in India in three decades, that include significant changes to the highly regulated agricultural sector and plans to widen India’s national social insurance program.⁸⁰
- ***Ensure that major reforms are enacted democratically.*** In several of these large democracies, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, leaders have used the pandemic to amass executive power. In others, such as India, leaders have pushed through important reforms yet have done so in a relatively undemocratic manner. The Modi administration, for example, pushed agricultural and labor reforms, which could bolster the Indian economy, with minimal discussion in parliament and debate among the public while continuing to harass and undermine the media.⁸¹ In Indonesia, President Jokowi has pushed through a major package of reforms designed to cut red tape, encourage investment, and restructure labor markets, but he also moved these measures through the legislature amid massive public protests and with little public

consultation, while trying to curtail civil society.⁸² Even if the measures effectively boost growth and possibly address inequality, passing them without significant public and legislative debate damages public trust. Instead, policymakers should ensure that major reforms are passed after extended periods of public debate, including transparent and open discussion in national legislatures. At the same time, leaders should resist the temptation to use the pandemic to consolidate more executive power by ensuring that any measures giving them greater immediate emergency powers have clear statutory time limits.⁸³

CONCLUSION

If the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines can foster societal reconciliation and promote transformative economic and political reforms at home, those shifts would have immediate and lasting benefits. They would cushion the devastating health and economic blows of the pandemic and help these states address longstanding societal disparities that threaten their stability. Such reforms would also likely have a significant public health benefit: any reconciliation that improves intra-societal public trust could help prepare these countries to better address future disasters, including pandemics.⁸⁴

Effective reforms in these five massive democracies would benefit the wider world as well. Given the size of these five democracies and their regional and global leadership roles, the world will be watching whether they can utilize the pandemic to address their increasingly dysfunctional politics and make structural changes to their economies and societies.

After all, democracy is regressing nearly everywhere around the globe, though these five states are some of the most notable examples. Many countries are struggling with rising polarization, growing popular disdain for expertise, and increasing inequality—at the same time that historically marginalized groups are speaking out more. In its most recent survey of global freedom, Freedom House noted that the world has suffered fifteen straight years of democratic regression.⁸⁵

Failing to implement substantial reforms could have disastrous consequences—both for these five states' economies and for their increasingly polarized political systems. If the pandemic leads to prolonged economic stagnation or recession in these leading democracies, it will probably further entrench deep economic and social inequalities. Moreover, continuing economic pain could make it even more tempting

for politicians to scapegoat various groups, stoke polarization, and present themselves as the only solutions to failed political systems. In so doing, they would foster greater distrust of all kinds of expertise and facilitate further democratic degradation.⁸⁶ This dynamic would likely reduce public trust in government and make it harder for future leaders to foster compromise and fight antidemocratic actions. And because these five countries include the most populous and powerful democracies in the world, their political direction—even a sharply regressive direction—sets an example for other democratic states.

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*Cover photo: Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro arrives
at Alvorada Palace in Brasília, Brazil, on April 20, 2020,
amid the COVID-19 outbreak.
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