



How Will the Coronavirus Pandemic Reshape the U.S. Election?

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

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Matthew Kroenig: Hi, Emma. I hope you've been doing well—and haven't developed a fever or dry cough—since we last communicated. I've been trying to stay productive while telecommuting with a toddler and infant at home. So, I'm looking forward to our dialogue to take my mind off all of this craziness. Although I suspect the craziness will be the primary subject of our discussion.

Emma Ashford: Me too! Though if this doesn't pan out, perhaps my housebound toddler could debate yours—say, on the merits of trains versus trucks?

I have to say, this is not exactly where I thought we'd be two weeks ago. Then, we were debating the Democratic candidates' foreign policies. Now, it seems like the primary is effectively over, and the election itself will be shaped primarily by the coronavirus rather than anything else.

MK: Yes. Coronavirus has drowned out everything else. And, if anything, this probably strengthens Joe Biden's position. I don't think people will vote for Bernie Sanders's promised revolution when the world is falling apart.

Political-science models of presidential elections are pretty crude, but they tend to find that economic performance in the third quarter of an election year matters quite a bit. A few weeks ago, Trump seemed to be in a strong position, but since then Wall Street has pretty much erased all the gains made by the stock market since Trump was inaugurated. Despite major Fed interventions and a stimulus plan, markets are still tanking, and now it looks like we're heading into a recession. What's your take?

EA: Well, President Trump's been wanting low oil prices in 2020 for a while. I'm not sure this is how he expected to get them, though. And it's not going to help him out the way he thought, either: Cheap gas doesn't help much if you can't leave the house!

I think you're right on the economic question. The global economy is in free fall, and it's not clear it will get any better any time soon. I hope it's just a recession. Because the alternative is a depression.

Bottom line for the election: The only thing anyone will be talking about between now and November is the coronavirus and the economy. That doesn't bode well for Trump.

MK: It is amazing to me, however, how resilient we seem to be in many ways. People are doing their best to continue and even improve their work and social lives virtually. I'm doing an online-only book launch later this month and people are hosting cocktail parties using Zoom videoconferencing.

I hope that American democracy also rises to the challenge. It's a shame, for example, that Ohio had to postpone their primary. Estonians vote from their cell phones in bed, and cyberexperts I talk to say their system is probably more secure than ours. There is no reason we cannot do the same thing here in the United States.

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EA: It is worrying to see people suggesting we postpone an election for a health crisis. Forget technology, we could do this by mail if we had to. Washington state did that, and just told voters not to lick their envelopes! But it's another area where the government appears to be entirely unprepared for this crisis—or frankly any crisis.

I find it fascinating that the president is facing down a challenge that he simply can't fight with his usual methods. He can't make up a funny nickname for the coronavirus and dismiss it as "fake news"—though he certainly tried to do so early on. And he can't simply apply the U.S. military as a blunt instrument the way he has in every foreign-policy crisis. You can't bluff your way out of a pandemic.

But if we want to pivot to actually talking about foreign policy for a second, the one thing the president is trying to do is pin the blame on China. What's the point of that now that it's spreading like wildfire in all 50 states? Does he think he'll get less criticism if he succeeds?

MK: Well, China does deserve its fair share of the blame. Its early attempts to conceal the outbreak made it impossible to contain and helped export this disease to the rest of the world. Then it engaged in draconian measures, including reportedly chaining people to trees, to try to get the disease under control. And the Chinese Communist Party is still probably lying about the numbers. You don't think China has earned some criticism?

EA: Look, China's leaders are who we always knew they were: authoritarian, unpleasant, and far more concerned about regime stability and power than the lives of their citizens. I'm personally disturbed that we haven't heard anything about what's happened with coronavirus in the camps

in Xinjiang. But let's be honest, the Trump administration isn't trying to call them to account for human-rights concerns here. They're literally trying to paint this as some sort of yellow peril.

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MK: I know people like to criticize the Trump administration for everything that's wrong with the world (and sometimes it is deserved) but let's pin the blame where it belongs in this case: on the Chinese Communist Party.

There are, however, ramifications for U.S.-China relations. Chinese officials are insinuating the virus was introduced by the U.S. military. Some in the United States claim the virus was created in a People's Liberation Army bioweapons lab. China has expelled U.S. journalists who had been reporting on the outbreak. The back-and-forth accusations are contributing to a downturn in relations at a time when U.S.-China cooperation could be helpful for stemming the crisis.

EA: This is why I think Trump's approach is so stupid. It appeals to his base and attempts to shift blame through crass racism, but doesn't consider the longer-term international consequences of the virus, which has the potential to be a world-changing event. It's not even clear that his base will approve if they start getting sick. After all, they're disproportionately older and at risk here.

On China, I'm worried that if the United States and China continue to throw mud at each other about the virus, it will worsen tensions in other areas too. Not to be alarmist, but that kind of thing has led to war before.

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MK: War isn't the only concern. There are also big implications for the future of the global order. We've seen throughout history that pandemics have contributed to the rise and fall of great powers. An epidemic in Athens contributed to its loss to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. And a plague in Italy shifted geopolitical power from Southern to Northern Europe in the 17th century. How Washington and Beijing manage this crisis in the coming weeks could influence who leads the international system decades from now.

Both sides are suffering economically, but how far they fall and how quickly they recover will shape when, or whether, China overtakes the United States as the world's largest economy.

Wavering nations around the world are watching closely to see whether the autocracy or the democracy can better manage this crisis, and their conclusions will have implications for the future of American and Chinese soft power and global alliances.

There are also military implications. If the U.S. government is distracted, or an outbreak among U.S. troops calls into question Washington's military readiness, do you think China would see an opportunity to act against Taiwan?

EA: I doubt it. But I agree that our responses to the coronavirus will shape the contours of the great-power debate in coming years. If this is a competition with China, the United States comes off looking really bad. China has managed its outbreak, albeit through draconian means; we look incapable of dealing with ours. China is offering aid to other states; we're shutting down all air travel to Europe. The comparisons are not good.

MK: I see it differently, but I am hardly an unbiased observer; I have argued that democracies tend to outcompete autocracies in great-power rivalry. China has nearly six times more confirmed cases than the United States. Beijing is reporting its worst economic numbers in decades. And, the party made bald-faced lies about the pandemic just weeks ago, so why do we suddenly believe them now? I suspect things are much worse in China than their officials are letting on.

EA: The United States has many sources of strength. But we're not using many of them at the moment. Our massive military is of limited use in a crisis like this, and where is our soft power? Instead of building ventilators for ourselves and the world, we're shutting down trade and engaging in racist saber-rattling. We used to be the Arsenal of Democracy. What are we today?

I'm not sure economic instability in China is something to be thrilled about either. If this crisis has highlighted anything, it's how closely integrated the world is. That comes with huge advantages, but also makes us vulnerable too. I'm concerned that this administration will take advantage to try to further shut off trade with China.

MK: In the spirit of never letting a good crisis go to waste, there are opportunities here. It is clear that there is a need to decouple the U.S. and Chinese economies in certain sensitive national-security areas—but with a scalpel, not a machete—and the natural decoupling that is happening as part of this crisis could facilitate that process.

EA: Yes, but who would wield that scalpel? This administration has proven repeatedly it can't be trusted to discern national security from trade protectionism.

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MK: But countervailing measures, such as tariffs, are necessary in certain industries. We can't allow China to cheat its way to domination of the most important technologies of the 21st century, for example, and the Trump administration deserves credit for having had the courage to take on China's unfair trading practices.

EA: That's debatable. But crises have a way of bringing problems to light, even if they've actually been there a long time. And in Italy, I see what many of us have been talking about for a long time: that there really isn't as much European solidarity, or NATO cooperation, as some

would have you believe. When Italy called for medical aid, none of its European Union partners answered. That bodes very poorly for the future of the EU and the NATO alliance.

MK: I would have liked to have seen stronger U.S. global leadership and transatlantic coordination in response to this crisis. Fred Kempe, president of the Atlantic Council, said Trump should have invoked NATO's Article 5 to deal with COVID-19. But, ultimately, NATO is a military alliance and the military aspects of the alliance have been strengthened on the ground over the past few years in response to the Russian threat. Speaking of Russia, do you believe that there are only 200 or so cases of COVID-19 there?

EA: Nope.

Of course there aren't so few cases. Authoritarian states don't produce reliable data. That's the exact same problem we have with China. It's even worse in Iran, where the disease appears to be burning out of all control as the regime tries to hide it. Russia may be at the same place as us on the curve, or it may be behind. Only time—and independent news reporting—will tell.

Russia is particularly badly positioned to deal with the crisis in economic terms, of course. It just started a price war with Saudi Arabia in the oil market, and declining oil prices are about to take a huge chunk out of the government's budget. But let's talk for just a minute about the global economy. Why do you think we haven't seen the kind of coordinated global response that we did in 2008?

MK: You're the international political economy expert. You go first.

EA: Well, I moonlight as one, at least. My gut feeling is that some crises draw countries together. A pandemic, on the other hand, pushes them apart. It suggests that every country is in this for itself. And we have seen a massive response in some places. Just look at the stimulus packages we're seeing proposed in the United Kingdom, and even here in the United States. What's your take on the fact that right-leaning governments are suddenly embracing fiscal stimulus?

MK: Well, they're the ones in power! But I think these plans will only be partially successful. They can provide temporary relief to those hit hardest by this crisis. But they are not going to do what a stimulus is meant to do, which is stimulate the economy. The economy is shutting down for good reason. People are avoiding travel, not eating out, not meeting their friends for a drink at the bar due to the virus. A government stimulus package will not change that. And you can't bail out every out-of-work pilot, waiter, and bartender in the country by sending them a \$1,000 or \$2,000 check, especially if this crisis goes on for months as some are predicting.

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EA: It's an unprecedented time. I mean, I work at the Cato Institute, and even some of my libertarian colleagues—who are normally opposed to any form of government intervention—are saying that action is warranted in this case.

One thing is clear, this has the potential to cause a massive upheaval in the international system. I asked a question on social media the other day that I still wonder about: Is this what it felt to live through 1914—as World War I started—or 1789, as the French Revolution began? Are we seriously entering a period of major international change? Or will things look pretty much the same as they did before when we emerge, with the United States still the global leader, and the world still heavily economically integrated?

MK: I've lived through the end of the Cold War, 9/11, and the global financial crisis, but I've never experienced anything quite like this. Right now, it does feel more significant. But you raise big questions that deserve further debate. Let's pick up here next time if all the Netflix streaming hasn't crashed the Internet.

I think I hear my kids killing each other.

EA: Toddlers and great powers have a lot in common, particularly the bit about living in a state of anarchy!

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