

## Andrés Velasco: The Populists' Pandemic

Because populist leaders of both the right and left have topped the ranks of incompetence during the pandemic, it has become common to claim that they will soon become its political victims. Alas, this may be wishful thinking, **writes Andrés Velasco for Project Syndicate**



### The crisis restored a modicum of respect towards "experts"

US President Donald Trump suggested that injecting them with household disinfectant might cure people of the coronavirus. Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte ordered police and military to shoot dead anyone "who creates trouble" during the stay-at-home period. And in Mexico, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador denied for weeks that the virus was a threat and continued to hug and shake hands with supporters, only to flip suddenly and impose a severe lockdown without warning.

Because populist leaders of both the right and left have topped the ranks of incompetence during the pandemic, it has become common to claim that they could soon become its political victims. Alas, this may be wishful thinking. The virus is lethal and ruthless, but alone it will not flatten the populist contagion curve.

The crisis has had one healthy byproduct: restoring a modicum of respect toward expertise. After making disparagement of experts a trademark of their political careers, both Trump and UK Prime

Minister Boris Johnson have been forced to hold press conferences with their scientific advisers, who have openly contradicted their bosses when needed. Even worse, Trump has had to endure the indignity of a poll showing that Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious disease expert, enjoys an approval rating nearly twice as high as his own.

## But other factors still operate in populists' favour

This is one strike against the anti-elitism that has propelled populists to power. But other factors still operate in their favour. Wild-eyed populists are certainly not the only ones making a hash of things. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte – not populists themselves, though they have populist junior partners in their coalition governments – have the unenviable record of leading countries that are world leaders in per capita coronavirus deaths.

And whoever said that facts drive political preferences, anyway? The weight of fake news and identity-driven politics may be rising, not falling, in the era of COVID-19. Trump blamed China for the virus and closed off the US to migrants, and his base cheered. Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro followed the same script, claiming that the coronavirus crisis is a media trick. As an epidemiologist from the University of São Paulo put it: "It's as if everybody's on the same train heading towards a cliff-edge and someone says: 'Look out! There's a cliff!' And the passengers shout: 'Oh no there isn't!' And the train driver says: 'Yeah, there's nothing there!'"

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Because establishing causal relationships is hard (Are lockdowns effective in slowing the rate of contagion? Are fiscal expansions effective in pulling the economy out of recession?), most people do not expect to arrive at answers on their own. Instead, they look to others who claim to know, and then they follow a simple rule of thumb: Believe people with whom I can identify, who talk and act like I do, and who are likely to share my values and make the decisions I would have made if I had enough information.

That is why voters trust populist politicians and distrust the political establishment, leaders of traditional institutions and, until recently, experts and technocrats. Whether populists gain or lose politically from the pandemic thus depends on whether the crisis strengthens or further weakens trust in democratic institutions.

I can imagine two very different replies to this second question. The first is the 2010 answer: As many voters saw it, after the global financial crisis Wall Street got a bailout, while Main Street got only unemployment and home foreclosures. (Forget that in the US the bailout averted another Great Depression and also made the government money.)

In some countries, the economic recovery was slow; in others, like Greece, the crisis dragged on for nearly a decade. Add a spoonful of corruption, a pinch of ineptitude, and a dash of juicy scandal, ranging from FIFA to the Catholic Church, and voilà: a perfect casserole of distrust. We are not in this together, many concluded. Elites look out only for themselves. Let's drain the swamp.

The alternative answer dates back to 1945. From the rubble and devastation of war, durable social trust emerged. In the UK and the US, the rich kid from Oxford or Yale had fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the coal miner's son from North Yorkshire or Hazard, Kentucky. Private businesses, large and small, had mobilized for a public purpose: the war effort. And politicians had delivered on the ultimate common good: victory.

The suffering and loss of life during World War II had been horrific. But in many countries, citizens could plausibly conclude that we are in this together, and together we will build a better tomorrow.

## **Virus contagion may be flattening, but unemployment and bankruptcy is on the rise**

So, which one will it be, 2010 or 1945?

While it is too soon to tell, the ritualistic applause for front-line health workers, whether in New York, Madrid, Paris, or Istanbul, is reminiscent of the spirit of 1945. In my corner of London, neighbours emerge every Thursday punctually at 8:00 p.m. not only to celebrate the National Health Service but also to trade stories and offer one another help with shopping or with a child who needs looking after.

Trust in a public institution and in your neighbours is bad for populism, and populist politicians know it. That is why Santiago Abascal, the leader of Spain's far-right Vox movement, is demanding an end to the applause and to the enthusiastic singing that accompanies it. Instead, he wants Spaniards to bang pots and pans in protest against the government.

But before liberal democrats get their hopes up, they should remember that the crisis will also sow plenty of divisions: between professionals who can work from home and factory workers who cannot; between the elderly who cannot go outside and the young who are being kept inside by government decree; and between formal workers who receive wage subsidies and the self-employed who have lost all income.

The virus contagion curve may be flattening, but the unemployment and business bankruptcy curves remain on the rise. If the public-health shock is followed by a protracted economic crisis that leaves many people behind, trust in government and institutions will suffer and national identities will fracture even more. It will be 2010 all over again – or worse. United we stand, divided we fall. If we fall, it won't be liberal democrats who pick up the pieces.

**The full original article first appeared on Project Syndicate [here](#).**