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MAKING FOREIGN POLICY

***A New Policy Puzzle: Why Did Some Countries Do Better Responding to COVID-19?***

Many countries that were able to control the number of COVID-19 cases are currently led by women. The governments of New Zealand, Taiwan, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Iceland were able to respond quickly, efficiently and control the number of infections. Their actions prevented their economies from collapsing and they have maintained robust health care and educational systems. How do we explain this outcome? All of these states are wealthy, relatively small and each have a social democratic culture. Another important characteristic is that the citizens of these states generally recognize the legitimacy of science and there are fewer political groups seeking to undermine scientific research by vigorously challenging any scientific research findings that challenge their core values and beliefs. Few if any health officials are threatened on social media and orders for social distancing and wearing masks are not seen as representing a particular political point of view. But as social scientists we want to know what factors offer acceptable explanations for New Zealand’s positive results or the failure of the US to control the spread of COVID-19?

In the first and fourth chapters we introduced you to *levels of analysis*. This is an analytical framework that scholars use to explain the foreign or domestic policy choices made by decision-makers. How might we use variables at each of the four levels of analysis to explain the decisions being made by world leaders? We are looking for the variable that explains the most. Does it have anything to do with the belief system or personality of a political leader? What about the role of the political culture of a society or the structure of the political system? Does it have anything to do with distribution of power and influence in the international system? Clearly, the rapid spread of the pandemic has everything to do with the global nature of our connections-our interdependence- but that does not explain the national reactions to the pandemic. The explanation is best found in the first or second levels of analysis: the individual level or the human dimension and the domestic level or national attributes.

In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, Frances Fukuyama, suggests that quality leadership is one of the reasons states have been successful in responding to the pandemic. Additionally, the capacity or resources available to a state and social trust or the public support for government institutions are also essential elements. In contrast those states with poor leadership, inadequate or dysfunctional public institutions and a divided or polarized electorate have not responded well to this crisis. These are all political, economic and cultural variables that help explain the difference in public responses to this virus. So, we are left asking does having a female leader make the difference? It probably has less to do with gender and more to do with the values and beliefs of individual leaders and the support that leader receives from a like-minded citizenry. As Fukuyama states: the “pandemic has revealed governments’ ability to provide solutions”. Clearly, national ideas, beliefs and policy actions are being challenged every day by extremist views that are diffused via Facebook and other social media outlets. But it seems that those states with a social democratic ethos have done the best in terms of mobilizing their publics to work cooperatively and collectively to confront the pandemic. The states mentioned earlier are “we” societies where experience says trust government and consider the interests and needs of the entire community when choices are made. In contrast, those states with a significant distrust of government and with strong support for individual rights may not do so well when confronting a disease that requires collective action and demands setting aside personal interests for the good of the whole. The US is an “I” society and giving up personal or national sovereignty for any reason is not a preferred path.

Some experts have argued that this pandemic challenges the future of democracy and the liberal international order. Many people believe that the pandemic will lead to more authoritarianism. History tells us that some leaders will use a crisis like this to assume more power and limit the rights of citizens. We hear rumblings that this is what is happening in places like China, India, Brazil, Hungary and Poland. Usually, the crisis simply provides an opportunity for political leaders already inclined to undermine democracy and stay in power to seize control. Still, there are many voices suggesting that there could be a renewed interest in liberal democracy and the liberal international order. In many situations, the state has emerged as a successful facilitator of a participatory problem-solving process. Regional governments, cities, provinces and coalitions of states within the US have shared resources and expertise and in many cases simply ignored those public officials unwilling to work with them to find common solutions.

Poor states with fragile governments will not do well with the pandemic without some help. Global networks of scientists and healthcare workers supported by NGOs and other members of global social movements will need to step-up and provide significant assistance to public and private actors in these fragile states. Not surprisingly, many of the states who are doing well containing the virus at home are also the leaders of efforts to assist the developing world and respond to humanitarian crises.

Frances Fukuyama, *The Pandemic and Political Order. It Takes a State*. **Foreign Affairs** July/August 2020 Vol. 99 #4 p 26-32

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Discussion Questions

1. What factors help nation-states respond effectively to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do you explain the failure of the US to react quickly and effectively to the COVID-19 virus? Use levels of analysis.
3. Democratic institutions might be under attack by leaders with authoritarian leanings. Responses to the pandemic might give these same leaders new reasons to shut down democratic institutions. How might citizens prevent this from happening?
4. What do you think about Professor Fukuyama’s explanation for why some nation-states have succeeded and others have failed?
5. What should world leaders do to help fragile states respond to this pandemic and future human security challenges?