

Democratic Institutions and COVID-19

In Brief

- The Edelman Trust Barometer indicated a global rise in the trust of government as an institution for the first time in the 20 year span of the study. Governments have reacted differently to the pandemic with some using the opportunity to centralize power and curtail rights.
- Governments that enjoy a high degree of trust from their citizens tend to have had relative success in limiting the spread of the virus.
- Decisions made during the pandemic will have long-term ramifications; governments must act responsibly.
- Collaboration and multilateral cooperation will be pivotal for continuing to control the pandemic and support global recovery.

Context

State institutions have been marshalled in response to the pandemic in democratic and undemocratic ways. In some states, power has been centralized for a short period of time to attempt to organize a cohesive response to the pandemic. In other instances, power has been centralized indefinitely to curtail rights and democratic practices, under the guise of a response to the pandemic. These are crucial differences to contemplate for recovery as countries continue to grapple with the health and economic ramifications of the pandemic.

Trust and confidence tend to impact the results of the pandemic response, not the nature of regime (e.g. liberal, authoritarian, etc.). For the first time in the 20 year span of its Trust Barometer, Edelman reported government to be the most trusted institution (receiving an 11 point boost since January). As Francis Fukuyama recently argued, [trust is what makes the difference against the Coronavirus](#). [Rachel Kleinfeld from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) noted that while records are mixed on responses by authoritarian and democratic governments, perceived political legitimacy, state capacity, and applying lessons learned from other health crises are factors critical to their success.

[John Packer and Slava Balan](#) capture the tension between human rights, state structures, and power in country responses to the pandemic. In response, they propose a human rights-based approach to orient state action for recovery.

Decisions made now will have repercussions for years and even generations to come. It is essential that governments consider the need for immediate response and responsible long-term planning for recovery.

Policy Approaches

One of the most important things governments can provide is the [timely and consistent delivery of accurate information](#). By doing so, citizens can make effective decisions more quickly. To disseminate this information, democratic institutions have been transitioning to digital platforms to deliver their services in an efficient, safe, and effective manner. Digital platforms have their limits, however, and it is likely that some form of [hybrid between digital and traditional delivery of services](#) will be the best approach to ensure those already marginalized groups, which may be constrained by limited access to technology, can access services.

Beyond domestic activities, it will be integral for government leaders to work together and [reaffirm their support for multilateral organizations](#). These organizations play a pivotal role in global issues, and the pandemic has flattened borders and eliminated boundaries in ways previously unseen. Foreign ministers of 24 countries issued a [joint statement](#), asserting the need for cooperation, transparency and coordination in a global science-based response.

Further Reading

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