

QT Opinion

What We Have Learned About COVID-19

With some therapeutic drugs that work to reduce mortality rates and vaccines round the corner, tremendous progress has been made since March when COVID-19 took the world by surprise

AS the pandemic wears on, month after month, it's easy to assume nothing much has changed. But it has. We're making more progress than many people may realize.

Take Regeneron. President Donald Trump recently spoke of his efforts to usher this new therapeutic drug through the process for emergency use authorization and to make it available to the public, free of charge. This synthetic antibody cocktail was part of the president's treatment plan when he was recently sickened with COVID-19.

His seemingly complete recovery is remarkable, considering he's an older man with a less than ideal bodyweight — factors that would predispose him to worse outcomes from COVID-19.

Regeneron is just one example of how much things have changed since March. We've learned a great deal about SARS-CoV-2 since it first reached America, including how to treat the disease and minimize mortality.

For example, we've learned that the lethal part of the disease process is largely due to a deranged inflammatory process known as a "cytokine storm," and that steroids, which counteract inflammation, have been shown to reduce the risk of death.

We've also learned who is at the greatest risk of dying to COVID-19, with the CDC recently publishing a list of conditions most associated with mortality, as well as its "best estimate" of infection fatality rates by age, based on data from around the world. The agency estimates that the chances of death are small to infinitesimal among infected people under age 50 and that those rates rise to around 0.5% (5 deaths per thousand infected people) for people between the ages of 50 and 69. The fatality rate is 10 times higher — five in 100 — for people over 70 who acquire the infection.

These are estimates derived from global data applied to the American population and fits in perfectly with what we have observed — namely that the elderly, especially those in nursing homes, account for nearly 80% of deaths due to COVID-19. This is information we did not have at the beginning, but gained it at tremendous cost.

We can see the real-world effects of our increased understanding of the disease. In the early phases of the pandemic in America, the peak average daily deaths were 2,113 on April 21. Following the massive spike in cases

that reached a daily case rate of more than 60,000 a day, the peak average daily deaths was 1,142 on Aug. 1. Thus, between the spikes earlier on and later in the pandemic, peak daily mortality decreased by more than 1,000 deaths.

In other words, between April and July, peak daily mortality decreased by 46%.

We can still do better, but it's clear that we've made tremendous progress against the virus. Back in March, when the White House first announced the "15 Days to Slow the Spread" initiative, as well as the subsequent 30-day extension, the aim was always to break the acceleration of the spread of COVID-19 and to buy time for health systems and health sciences to catch up to the fast-moving virus.

The aim was never to achieve zero case transmission at the cost of every other aspect of our lives, and yet that's what numerous governors and mayors have intimidated as their intention.

The great and beleaguered city of New York, for instance, only began to allow indoor dining with tight restrictions on Sept. 30. Less than a week later, both Mayor Bill de Blasio and Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced closures of restaurants in certain areas deemed to be spiking in cases.

This may have been reasonable in the early phases of the pandemic, when the New York City metropolitan statistical area alone was responsible for the overwhelming majority of mortality in the country, but New York has not averaged more than 10 deaths per day since early July.

New Yorkers deserve a lot of credit for suffering the brunt of the pandemic, and for maintaining a remarkably low mortality rate for the past few months. They deserve some degree of stability and certainty, and they deserve better than the uncertain fits and starts to their reopening efforts. This abject failure of leadership is cruel to New Yorkers and is slowly killing the greatest city in the history of the world.

We've come to learn a great deal about this virus at a great cost, but we have already seen the harshest outcomes of the disease blunted by advances in COVID-19 treatment and management. Looking forward, we have existing drugs that have been shown to reduce mortality, new therapeutics that will be authorized and vaccines right around the corner.

It is no longer March. It's time we start acting like it.

(TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE)

America Needs Compulsory Voting

Compulsory voting can lead to people being better informed about the process which will help the voters make informed decisions

ANTHONY FOWLER
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

ELECTORAL participation in the United States lags far behind that in other developed democracies. Typically, about six in ten eligible voters have cast ballots in recent presidential elections—and turnout rates for midterms, primaries, and state and local elections are lower still.

A 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that large majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and independents agree that high voter turnout in presidential and local elections is very important. But how legitimately can Americans claim that their government is "of the people, by the people, for the people," when close to half of their fellow citizens don't participate in the political process at all?

Persistent Underrepresentation

Even more troubling than abysmal voter turnout, though, is the extent to which young, low-income, and minority groups and interests are underrepresented in the political process. Analyzing data from the 2014 midterm elections, I found that 67-year-olds had more than six times the electoral influence of 18-year-olds—despite the fact that the younger group was larger. Old, wealthy, and white communities consistently vote at higher rates than young, poor, and minority ones, and these disparities may partly explain why elected officials in the United States are, on average, older and wealthier than the populations they represent and why the policies they support often fail to reflect the preferences of their constituents.

Reformers have spent decades fighting for policies aimed at increasing voter participation among underrepresented groups, but most of these hard-won improvements—including same-day registration, youth preregistration, early voting, voting by mail, and even mobile voting—have only modestly increased overall participation. Perversely, many of these efforts have succeeded more in mobilizing the old, white, and wealthy populations who were already voting at high rates than in luring historically underrepresented communities to the polls.

When Ryan Enos, Lynn Vavreck, and I reassessed 24 experimental get-out-the-vote interventions that had previously been shown to boost voter turnout, we found that the interventions, on average, actually exacerbated inequalities in political participation: the strategies successfully encouraged more people to exercise their right to vote, but the larger pools of voters they helped to produce were, in many cases, even less representative of the American electorate as a whole. The persistent intractability of participatory inequality in the United States led Arend Lijphart, an expert on comparative voting systems and a former president of the American Political Science



Association, to call unequal voter participation "democracy's unresolved dilemma."

A Collective Action Problem

Students and journalists often ask me why so few people vote. But the real mystery is why so many people vote. Voting is tedious. It often involves unfamiliar paperwork and shuffling in long lines through crowded, poorly lit rooms. The chances that an individual's vote is going to affect the outcome of a U.S. presidential election, even in a battleground state in a very close race, are less than one in one million. Contemplating these odds, a person might reasonably conclude that voting makes little sense. Voting, in other words, is a classic collective-action problem. Individuals have little incentive to vote, but if everyone voted, society as a whole would benefit from a government that more accurately reflects public preferences and goals. Citizens face collective-action problems daily, in virtually every domain of public life. Though many people would naturally prefer not to pay taxes or serve on juries, communities fare better when citizens accept these duties, and societies have developed mechanisms to ensure that they do so.

US courts don't rely on volunteers knocking on people's doors encouraging them to show up for jury duty, and bureaucrats at the IRS don't waste time trying to design messages or reforms to induce people to voluntarily send in their tax payment checks (what if we made tax day a national holiday?). Instead, these collective-action problems are solved through various forms of compulsion: citizens who don't appear for jury service or pay their taxes on time face fines or other penalties.

Why not compel people to vote as well? I am one of the co-authors of a recent report by the Brookings Institution and the Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation that advocates for what we call "universal civic duty voting." Just like paying taxes, we believe, voting should be an expectation of citizenship: people should be legally compelled

to vote and fined if they don't. Unequal participation is a problem for the United States and its democracy because electoral and policy outcomes do not necessarily represent the will of the public. American society would benefit from universal voter turnout because electoral outcomes would be better, fairer, and more legitimate. But because individuals don't have much incentive to vote, the only way to achieve near-universal participation is through some form of compulsion.

In the report, we recommend that the fines be small (around \$20) and that election officials waive fines when extenuating circumstances make voting too burdensome.

A Civic Duty

There will be many objections to compulsory voting in the United States. Many Americans will feel that they should have the right not to vote. To be clear, we recommend that citizens be compelled to cast a ballot, not that they should be compelled to vote for any candidate. If they would like to vote for "none of the above," they should have that right. But we don't believe compulsory voting violates civil rights any more than compulsory tax paying, compulsory driving under the speed limit, or compulsory jury service.

One objection is that if people choose not to vote, perhaps they don't care, they're uninterested, or they don't deserve to have their interests represented. Certainly, many Americans are uninformed or apathetic about politics, and Michele Margolis and I have found that many would change their vote choices and partisan leanings if they were more informed. But since nobody has a rational, instrumental incentive to vote in a large election, I don't see any reason to politically reward those who vote because they happen to enjoy doing so. Furthermore, there is some evidence that once you induce people to vote, they become more informed, so compulsory voting would likely improve the extent to which eligible voters pay attention to politics and hold informed views.

Are We Fighting The Last Infowar?

A narrow focus on the style of disinformation used in the 2016 US presidential campaign risks overlooking other potential threats

JACOB PARAKILAS
THE DIPLOMAT

SINCE Donald Trump's upset victory in 2016, the topic of information warfare has dominated strategic conversations in the United States and Europe. New research programs focused on countering disinformation and identifying propaganda and bot networks have sprung up; congressional and parliamentary hearings and working groups have been convened on the topic; and news and social media companies have been refining their policies on dissemination of hacked and possibly fraudulent materials.

The expectation, clearly, is that we are now in an era of permanent infowar. And with U.S. intelligence agencies having firmly pointed the finger at Russia for its role in the 2016 election, the question has frequently been: Will other authoritarian countries follow the same playbook? Though the question has been raised with respect to any number of countries — Saudi Arabia, Iran, North Korea — the most pressing object of Western concern is China, whose resources are substantially greater than Russia's and which has many more points of leverage thanks to

its much higher degree of embeddedness in the global economy.

And yet there are reasons to be skeptical that the particular genre of information warfare that led to this upsurge of attention will be a defining feature of modern intrastate conflict.

To be clear: The evidence that the Russian military intelligence service did perpetrate the hack-and-dump operation targeting the Democratic Party using WikiLeaks as a front is very strong. The evidence that it affected the election is less so. That's not to say that there was no effect; with the election decided by less than 80,000 votes across three states, especially given that many voters made up their minds at the last minute, it is impossible to write off the possibility that it was at least one of several contributing factors that pushed Trump over the top. But voters often don't accurately remember which party they voted for, let alone their rationale for doing so. Accurately tracking down the cause of any particular vote is nearly impossible.

As a result, the attack has been attributed down to the level of federal indictments for the individual military intelligence operatives responsible, but no one knows whether



it was effective or not.

And yet, the shock outcome generated a massive sea change in the prominence of counter-disinformation, once a relatively quiet subfield. And the language around it quickly merged into that of national defense: democracy under attack; war by other means; we need a national mobilization to respond.

The emphasis on defending against hack and leak operations has had some positive impacts. In France, Emmanuel Macron's presidential campaign was prepared for an attempted hack and leak and immediately discredited the story. Meanwhile the reaction of news and social media to such at-

tempts in the current U.S. presidential election has been considerably more skeptical than during the last one.

But those successes obscure a few broader issues — not least that an overemphasis on foreign electoral interference can serve to obscure more meaningful domestic and structural problems.

For one thing, the measures taken to prevent or mitigate foreign electoral interference are shaped by the known instances of hacking, and particularly by the discourse around those instances. But the particulars of those cases are not remotely close to the potential boundaries of information warfare. Hacking and leaking emails might have worked in 2016, but if anything has generated diminishing returns since then. Is it credible that any disruptive power will keep throwing resources at a set of increasingly ineffective tactics?

It is also worth considering that — as with diplomacy and strategic messaging at the international level — "our" perspective of what is possible, feasible or effective with information warfare is fundamentally different from those who actually carry out such operations against us. Building resilience and verification mechanisms into information

dissemination systems is valuable because it increases the friction for any such operation; but assuming that all adversaries have the same basic motivation and will use similar tactics in similar ways will leave avoidable vulnerabilities.

Nor, as with conventional defense, should we assume that the greatest vulnerability is to new or emerging technologies, like AI "deepfakes." Those do deserve attention, but if we are to treat information warfare as a national security threat, we should be guided by the numerous historical examples of defenses breached by innovative tactics rather than technical wizardry, from the Blitzkrieg to the Toyota War. After all, focusing on a silver bullet technology in the hands of an adversary is as short-sighted as hoping for one in your own.

None of this is to say that hacking and leaking aren't real threats, or that disinformation and the effect that modern mass media has of shattering our shared sense of reality — unintentionally or otherwise — is a minor issue for democracy and governance. But we should apply the same heuristics as we do in other forms of risk management and not assume that the next threat will look exactly like the last one.