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Author
Rosenberg, Shawn

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Pandemic, Politics and the Decline of Democracy

Shawn Rosenberg
Depts of Political Science and Psychological Science
University of California, Irvine

Faculty website:
http://www.faculty.uci.edu/profile.cfm?faculty_id=2469

To download selected research papers:
http://uci.academia.edu/ShawnRosenberg

Pandemic! In six months, Covid 19 has caused the death of more than 200,000 Americans and infected over 7 million more. The lockdowns instituted to curb its spread have battered the economy. Millions have lost their jobs and thousands of businesses have been forced to close. What are the implications for American politics? Analysts have spoken to immediate impacts on President Trump's approval ratings and his chances for re-election in November. But what of the longer-term impact of the pandemic? Democracy in America already appears increasingly fragile. Will the pandemic weaken it further? Here I argue that effects of the crisis will extend well beyond the election, regardless of who is elected. In my view, it is contributing to a broader structural shift that is undermining the legitimacy of democratic institutions and principles in favor of government which is more authoritarian and populist.

The immediate impact on everyday life. To begin, let's be clear what the pandemic means for the average American. Most obvious is the danger it poses. Covid 19 can kill you or make you very sick. In many cases, symptoms persist for months after 'recovery.' Even if you are asymptomatic, you can potentially endanger friends and loved ones. It is also largely a mystery. Where does it comes from? How dangerous is it? How do we protect ourselves? Who is in charge? What are they really doing? Dangerous, ubiquitous and unexplained, Covid 19 is frightening. Beyond the

danger it presents, the pandemic has also disrupted the myriad of routines that structure and give meaning to everyday life. So much that was once routine, familiar and comfortable has suddenly become uncertain, complicated and confusing.

The difficulty of coping is exacerbated by the lack of clear social and political direction. In times of danger and uncertainty, average citizens turn to authoritative elites for answers regarding what is happening and how to act going forward. Now, however, this does not appear to be a viable option. The elite response has been manifestly inadequate. On the one hand, the stories America's health experts and political leaders have told about the origins of the virus, the extent of the danger and what people needed to do have been revised time and again over the last six months. On the other hand, leaders are regularly contradicting one another, not only discounting each others' recommendations, but also questioning their personal competence and integrity. Most problematic, of course, they failed to solve the problem. The pandemic has not been contained and no vaccine or cure has been forthcoming. Consequently, many Americans feel they left to their own devices to cope with the health threat and manage their disrupted lives.

Psychological implications. In part the challenge people are facing is an unusually demanding one both cognitively and emotionally. Coping with Covid 19 requires considering uncertain, conflicting accounts and then making one's own necessarily tentative determination about the risks involved and how to respond. Similarly, the uncharted field of the changing

conditions of daily life requires imagining alternative ways of acting and then making one's own determinations as what to do when and how. All of this requires levels of reflection, judgement and creative strategizing that are rarely a part of 'normal' life.

Matters are further complicated by that fact our daily lives our intertwined with other people and therefore we cannot act alone. Rather together we must agree on how to interact in the newly configured social spaces we share. To do so we must co-operate with spouses, children, friends and co-workers who typically bring different preferences and concerns to the table. Consequently, not only must we come to our own judgments, but we must justify them to others in a way they may find convincing. This requires a level of self-examination, perspective-taking and communication far beyond what is usually required to repeat well-worn patterns of interaction or tweak them as particular circumstances require.

Citizen limitations. Given the complexities of the pandemic, the broad-spread nature of the social dislocations it has produced and the failures of American experts and leaders, unusual responsibility falls on to American citizens to craft their own understandings and forge their own responses. While a heavy burden, it is not unmanageable insofar as people have the cognitive capacity required. The problem is that 70 years of psychological research has documented that, for the most part, people are incapable of thinking in the requisite reflective, principled, systematic way (Lodge & Taber 2013). Instead they typically make sense of events and

situations by unselfconsciously applying pre-existing, mental templates or cognitive schemas. Based on prior experience or a cultural narrative and unreflectively applied, these schemas generate understandings that are fragmentary, prejudicial and often distorting. When appropriately motivated, people can more actively process information. However, their capacity to do so is limited. Rather than fully considering of alternatives and calculating probable outcomes, people use cognitive short cuts or heuristics (Kahneman, 2011). This allows for a much simpler, quicker assessment of a situation, but unfortunately one that is often incorrect. The potential for distortion is compounded as these cognitive efforts are readily prejudiced by emotional reactions and affective commitments (e.g. (Abelson, et al, 1968k; Haidt, 2007).

My research on the development of social and political cognition complements and extends these findings (Rosenberg 2002, Rosenberg & Beattie 2019). While I argue that the cognitive limitations discussed are not natural, 'hard-wired' or universal, most people thinking is not reflective, systematic or abstract in the ways suggested. As a result, the world they understand consists of concrete actors and actions that are related to one another via context free cause and effect relations, simple homogeneous categories and straightforward hierarchies of status and power. Once learned, these relationships are regarded not only as normal and true, but also as normative and right. The cause and effect relationships define codes of behavior and ways of speaking, the categorical relationships define the

people who belong to the category (and those who do not), and the hierarchical relationships define the relative social status and power in ways that are not only typical and natural, but also necessary and desirable. Consequently most people are thinking in a way that is not only deeply dependent on the particulars of their personal experience and cultural exposure, it also produces 'knowledges' that render that the regularities of their experience and the narratives and conventions of their culture to be natural, true and right. The result is a rigidity of thought that precludes effective innovation and leads to a view of social change as a violation.

 Overall, the psychological research suggests that people lack the cognitive architecture to negotiate the danger posed and the changes wrought by the pandemic. They live in a world of certainties where causes have clear effects and vice versa. In this world, they have learned how to behave and when. Confronted by a virus whose causes and effects are unclear and presented with response strategies whose mitigating effects are uncertain, people are left confused and frightened. The difficulties are exacerbated by the changing conditions of everyday life. People know who they are and what they are supposed to doing by drawing on their knowledge of well-established patterns and clear cultural norms of how particular people behave in specific situations. However, the pandemic has disrupted the conditions of home, work, social and political life and rendered the conventional ways of acting in them unworkable. In the process, one's personal identity and one's connection to other people are rendered

confused and uncertain. What is upended is not only what is typically the case, it is also what should be the case. Consequently, apart from the confusion, there are left with a sense of violation and, looking forward, a lack of moral direction. The overall result is not only heightened levels of fear and anxiety, but also frustration and anger at having these unnatural and undesirable conditions foisted upon them.

Social and political consequences. The personal impact of the pandemic has significant social and political consequences. Support for existing social and political institutions is being undermined. The fear, anger and frustration people feel readily translates into resentment. The immediate target are the cultural and political leaders who first allowed the situation to as bad as it is and then were unable to resolve it. Because of their perceived failure, their authority is being delegitimated. Given the simple causal and categorical nature of the understandings people construct, this delegitimation readily extends to the broader cultural and political structures with whom this discredited elite is associated. As scientists appear not to know what they are talking about, the institutes and universities that support them are devalued accordingly. Similarly, as political leaders seem to know little and to act only in their narrow self-interest, the governmental institutions to which they belong (e.g. the Congress, the judiciary, etc.) are regarded as ineffective and suspect. As these traditional authority figures and institutions are rejected, a confused and anxious people will seek out alternative ones.

In addition, the political culture is moving toward an exclusionary nationalism, a greater racism and a more strident xenophobia. Under stable circumstances, questions regarding who one is, how one relates to others and where one belongs are rarely raised. Embedded in the regularities of everyday life and dominant cultural narratives, the answers to these questions are self-evident. However, as these routines and conditions are disrupted, existential questions emerge as salient and the need for answers are charged with anxiety and anger. People are seeking new self-definition by identifying with social groups that makes sense in their terms. For most people, these are categorical groups whose members all share the same behaviors, stated beliefs or physical appearance. The integrity of the group depends on this commonality and membership demands the requisite conformity. Given the diminished power of prevailing group definitions, existing groups (e.g. the American nation or the Republican party) may be redefined in these terms. Alternatively, new groups (e.g. new religious groups, new social movements) may be created. Complementing the construction of 'us', is the distinguishing of 'them' who have different defining characteristics and are therefore are essentially unlike us. Cast in these terms, these other groups are either irrelevant or a potential threat. Ordering the social world in these terms not only provides the kind of cognitive clarity, it is also emotionally satisfying. Belonging by conforming addresses people's confusion, estrangement and insecurity. At the same

time, the rendering of the 'other' as alien provides a satisfying validation for their anxiety and a ready target for their anger and resentment.

The weakening of an already fragile democracy. Recently several commentators have discussed the present weakening of democracy. To explain what is happening, they have pointed to immigration, economic recession and inequality, and the norm breaking behavior of political elites (e.g., Muller, 2016, Bonikowski, 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018). These factors do have an important impact, however, in my view, there is a deeper, more pervasive and less readily addressed problem, the limited capacity of citizens. As I have argued elsewhere, liberal democracy with its abstract principles of freedom and equality, complex institutional arrangements and conflictual deliberative practices are already very difficult for most people to understand and embrace (Rosenberg, 2019, 2020). When it comes governing, most Americans think that, as in the military or a business, someone must be in charge for decisions to made and effectively executed. Institutional arrangements that constrain executive power such as are regarded as unwarranted obstructions. Regarding nationality, being American means being like other Americans by conforming to shared beliefs, common codes of behavior and often similar appearance. In this context, respect for differences among in-group members (e.g. critics and deviants) or of outgroup members (such as minorities, immigrants or foreigners) makes little sense. To the contrary, these differences may threaten the integrity of nation and thus the identity of its citizens and should be

suppressed accordingly. Thinking in these terms, most people cannot understand, readily value or naturally support liberal democracy.

Nonetheless the US has remained a liberal democracy with broad popular support. In my view, this is because the US, like many western democratic countries, have been democratic in only a limited sense. Despite democratic institutional arrangements, power has been in the hands of a relatively small elite. While divided among themselves along more progressive and conservative lines, these elites are united in their appreciation of democratic governance, the protections it affords and of course the benefits they enjoy. Consequently, they have deployed their power over nomination processes to sideline political figures who to threaten democratic processes and their control of the mass media and educational institutions to guide the national political discussion and exclude anti-democratic messages. Thus, they have been to provide direction for a public that might naturally be receptive to undemocratic alternatives.

The problem is that power of this oligarchic elite is waning. Since the late 1960s, the competitive capitalism, technological innovation, the social dislocations of mass migration and the ever-greater democratization of governance have combined to weaken the authority of how things have traditionally been done and the powers who controlled them. In the process, individuals have been emancipated to come to their own understanding of their situation and needs, and to freely choose the direction they and others must follow. But people typically lack the cognitive capacity to generate

their own understandings and self-direct accordingly. Instead they depend on conventional beliefs and practices to guide them and on authoritative leaders to clarify what these are and how they are to be applied. Rejecting traditional resources and unable to make sense of things themselves, people are increasingly seeking alternative authority (political, social and religious) to provide the new certainties and moral direction they require.

With the rise of social media, the messages offered by alternative authorities are becoming more readily available. Insofar as they offer a view of the world that people can readily understand and appreciate, they will be enthusiastically embraced by a public that is otherwise confused, alienated and anxious. Most politically significant now are right wing populist movements. Their vision resonates with the kind of understandings most people naturally construct. Social and political problems have clear and simple causes and can be readily addressed with strong, direct action. To act as needed, government should be hierarchically structured to facilitate executive action. Institutions which obstruct that action should be dismantled. 'We the people' are concretely defined. We share the same basic characteristics, the same unassailable beliefs and aspire to the same shared goals. To share these characteristics is to belong and thereby to be provided a clear identity, certain direction and protection in an otherwise uncertain and threatening world. Juxtaposed to us are alien 'others' who have different characteristics, beliefs and goals. Whether they are the

internal 'other' of minorities and immigrants or the external 'other' of foreigners, they are at best irrelevant and at worst a threat.

The broader and longer-term consequences of the Covid 19 pandemic are best understood in this context. The dangers it presents and social dislocations it creates are exacerbating the confusion, anxiety, alienation and anger people feel. They need clarity, saviors and scapegoats. Given the more concrete, fragmentary ways in which most people think, the message of liberal democracy with its code of 'political correctness' is too abstract and complex to satisfy. Meanwhile the pandemic has further delegitimated the messengers. For many people, the failures of science, health experts and political leaders to deal with the crises is further evidence of their inability to lead or their lack of common interest with the people. The pandemic thus contributes to the process whereby the oligarchic defenders of democracy are losing their authority and power to impose their vision on an increasingly alienated public. Emancipated from the strictures of social convention and traditional authority, people are free to make their own choices. In so doing, they are increasingly choosing against democracy in favor of more authoritarian populist alternatives. Thus democracy is in danger of democracy devouring itself. Unhappily, this is not a uniquely American problem. Democracy in Europe is similarly at risk.

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