

Why public trust in the WHO matters



Public faith in the World Health Organisation has held up so far. But Donald Trump's efforts to discredit it are damaging not just because they inhibit America's co-operation with other countries, writes [Renu Singh](#). They also make it less likely that, in the absence of strong domestic leadership, US citizens will trust the WHO enough to follow its recommendations.

As COVID-19 continues to spread around the globe, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has played a central role in responding to the pandemic. The UN agency has [194 member states](#) and 149 field offices worldwide, and it focuses on health emergencies like COVID-19, but also on issues related to universal health coverage and health and wellbeing. And yet, despite its important role, the WHO has increasingly come under attack by political actors, especially in the United States. Most notably, President Donald Trump announced in April that he is [freezing](#) US funding to the WHO over what he claims are shortcomings in its handling of the pandemic.



Donald Trump addresses journalists in the gardens of the White House. Photo: [White House](#). Public domain

With the US the largest financial contributor to the WHO's multibillion-dollar annual budget, the president's decision could lead to serious health, socioeconomic, and political consequences. Trump's criticisms also reflect a more general trend toward anti-intellectualism or distrust in experts in the United States. With the rise in populism and an overflow of accessible news and [information](#), the political clout of experts has seemingly decreased. As an institution run by [health experts](#), one might expect the WHO to be discounted even in this moment when they would matter most.

Thus far, however, the WHO seems to have retained the public's confidence. In a [study](#) conducted in early March, 77 percent of Americans indicated that they trust it to manage the response to international outbreaks like coronavirus. In fact, Americans ranked the WHO above all other institutions, including the military, nonprofits and governments. Indeed, more than three out of every four Americans also trust the WHO to coordinate among other countries to help slow the spread of COVID-19 – again, higher than any other institution mentioned. In addition, the public shows widespread support for international cooperation that aims to slow the spread of COVID-19 and the sharing of scientific research among countries – both central tenets of the WHO's approach.

Not only does the public trust this expert-led global health institution, but Americans also believe that the WHO holds more responsibility than any other governmental or nongovernmental entity for slowing the spread of COVID-19. More than three-quarters of Americans hold this view, ranking the responsibility of the WHO only below that of individuals. Despite arguments about the death of expertise in America, these attitudes seem to align with a more general trend in which Americans express high [trust in scientists](#) broadly. People still want experts to guide policies in many domains, and this may be especially true during a global health emergency.

The existence of widespread confidence in experts generally, and in the WHO specifically, is important for a number of reasons. Not the least is that institutions like the WHO can make scientifically-driven recommendations for individual citizens to coordinate their response to a public health emergency at a global level, especially when their governments are failing to do so. The importance of this role is particularly evident from how the so-called “[Ostrich Alliance](#)” countries have responded to the coronavirus. The leaders of Brazil, Nicaragua, Belarus, and Turkmenistan have been particularly obtuse in continuing to deny the public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, providing their publics with no leadership, guidance, or precautionary measures to deal with its spread. It has also been argued that the US and UK are [joining ranks](#) in the form of Trump’s insistence on wanting to open up the US economy by May and Boris Johnson’s blasé approach to precautions and meetings about the virus. While these governments dither, their citizens can still turn to the WHO as a trusted source for guidance and information on how to stay safe.

That is why it is dangerous for the WHO to be dragged into [partisan political battles](#), particularly by a national leader like Trump. Beyond the fact that it harms governments’ ability to coordinate, such politicisation will encourage the president’s partisans to view the WHO as a biased and untrustworthy source of information. These perceptions could weaken the Organisation’s ability to inform the public effectively. The last thing we need is for the WHO and global public health to go the way of climate science and become the next victim of partisan polarisation.

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