

The future of politics after COVID-19: Four trends that are already discernible



While the many effects that COVID-19 will have on politics are still being determined, it is possible to discern a number of relevant trends, writes [Jonathan Wheatley](#). He discusses the likely impacts of the pandemic on the divide in economic and cultural values, gender politics, the future of the EU, and the future of the UK.

2020 has been a year like no other. Life as we know it has been put on hold as governments and citizens turn their energies to the struggle against the spread of COVID-19. Politics, in its normal sense, has mainly been put on hold too, with voters rallying behind their incumbent leaders in most countries.

Nevertheless, as spring turns to summer [there are signs that this is ending](#). In the United States, [the death of George Floyd](#) at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer has further polarised society between Donald Trump's authoritarian populist support base and a growing network of mainly young activists. This, in combination with the COVID-19 outbreak and [Trump's erratic behaviour in the face of this crisis](#), has arrested and reversed the modest boost in support that Trump experienced early in the crisis. In the United Kingdom the rather stronger rally behind the Conservatives and Boris Johnson that occurred in the early weeks of the crisis [has also gone into reverse](#) in the wake of the Dominic Cummings scandal and the government's perceived incapacity to fully get to grips with the pandemic. In short, contentious politics is back.

The medium- and long-term effects that COVID-19 will have on politics will depend to a large extent on how long it lasts. Nevertheless, it is already becoming possible to discern a number of trends.

The divide in economic and cultural values

First, there is the issue of how the epidemic will affect the political divide both in economic values between the left and the right, and in cultural values between liberal globalists and conservative nationalists. On the former set of values, there are tentative signs that COVID-19 has led to an increased focus on public services, such as healthcare, and to a greater appreciation of the role played by low-paid workers in the vital health and social care sectors. In the UK, for example, the high esteem in which the NHS is now held will make it more difficult for the government to allow further private sector involvement in healthcare, and pressure for the well-paid to relieve the burden for the most vulnerable sectors of society will further grow.

In terms of the divide in cultural values, however, this is likely to become ever more polarised. In a number of countries, such as the [USA](#), [Spain](#), and [Brazil](#), nationalist populists have opposed lockdown measures and some have even sought to downplay the impact of the virus, and even in the UK there is some evidence that [voters' views](#) of the pandemic and how it is being managed have become increasingly aligned not only with party political loyalties but also with Leave and Remain identities. As countries emerge from the lockdown, a debate on whether to return as quickly as possible to the status quo ante or whether to [use COVID-19 as a pretext](#) to rethink the relationship between humans and the environment is likely to take centre stage.

Gender politics

Second, the pandemic may have huge consequences for gender politics. The lockdown has affected the family and the roles of its members in a number of ways. The closure of schools has led to a massive increase in domestic childcare needs, including home schooling, and [there is evidence](#) that women have mostly picked up the flak. Moreover, more women than men have lost their jobs during the crisis. At the same time, a majority of frontline healthcare workers are women ([about three-quarters in the EU](#)), meaning that in a number of households, childcare responsibility passes to men. This also has the potential to make the essential work carried out by women more valued.

Another gender element that has become intertwined with the crisis is the role of female leaders in dealing with it. The caution and attention to detail [that have characterised the responses](#) of New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, Germany's Angela Merkel, Denmark's Mette Fredricksen, Finland's Sanna Marin and Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen has been contrasted with a more cavalier approach to the crisis by a number of male leaders.

The future of the EU

Third, the pandemic may shape the future of the European Union. While [intergovernmentalists argue](#) that states look after their own interests and only co-operate with other countries if it is in their interests to do so, [neofunctionalists hold](#) that crises such as the one we are experiencing now makes further integration unavoidable. The recent decision by the European Commission, backed by Germany, to launch an [EU Recovery Fund worth €750bn](#) by borrowing directly from the financial markets seems to support the neofunctionalist argument, but [there is still strong resistance to the plan](#) by the Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden and this resistance is likely to increase in the probable event of a much larger bailout being needed. Given the growing Euroscepticism in a number of EU countries, most notably [Italy](#), as a result of the EU's perceived slow response to the crisis, the EU's capacity to build solidarity in the medium term may make or break the organisation, setting it on the path either to a new phase of integration or to a resurgence of nationalism.

The revival of regionalism

Fourth, some countries may experience a revival of regionalism where regional governments are in charge of healthcare and take the key decisions on how to deal with the epidemic. This is more likely if they are seen as more competent in managing the crisis than the national government. Here, Scotland is perhaps the prime example. In normal times, the UK government still represents the main centre of power, even in those nations that have devolved governments. However during the crisis, the most vital element of Scottish people's lives – their health – lies not in the hands of the Westminster government and Boris Johnson, but in the hands of Nicola Sturgeon and her government. The centrality of the Scottish government in ordinary people's lives, as compared to a remote and (in the eyes of many Scottish voters) incompetent Westminster government, boosts the case for Scottish independence. Indeed recent opinion polls in Scotland not only show [overwhelming support for the SNP](#), but also [support for independence](#) running at near, or slightly above 50%.

Moreover, more Scots trust the Scottish government on the COVID-19 crisis than trust the UK government. According to an IPSOS-MORI poll published on 26 May, [78% of Scots](#) felt the Scottish Government had done well in the crisis, while just 34% felt likewise about the UK Government. Some "regionalisation of politics" might also be seen in federal states in which regional governments are in charge of healthcare, such as Germany, Canada and the USA, although in a number of these cases regional governments [have been criticised for lacking a prudent strategy](#).

These conclusions are very tentative and many future pathways are possible. But our political landscape may well look very different in a post-COVID era.

About the Author



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