

What the COVID-19 pandemic has meant for American political life



As we approach the one-year anniversary of many of the first COVID-19 lockdowns, LSE US Centre Director [Professor Peter Trubowitz](#) focuses on three important impacts of the pandemic on the US: the partisan divide; the 2020 presidential contest; and America's role in the world.

How has COVID-19 affected partisanship and polarization in America?

COVID-19 has changed many things in America, but most of the research shows that the pandemic did not drive the nation's partisan wedge deeper. America was already divided along partisan lines, and while there have been clear partisan differences in behavioral responses (over social distancing and wearing masks, for example), a large [Stanford study](#) indicates that the level of partisan polarization in the US today is roughly the same as it was before the outbreak of the pandemic. After an initial rally-round-the-flag effect, polarization returned to its pre-pandemic levels, fueled by the nation-wide protests over the killing of George Floyd by police. To be sure, the partisan divide in America is wider than in other established democracies. But at the end of the day, polarization appears to have parsed the pandemic in the United States and not the other way around. This is not to say it hasn't influenced American politics.

What did the pandemic mean for the 2020 election?

In my view, there is a very good chance that Donald Trump would still be president if he didn't make such a hash of managing the pandemic. Indeed, when it comes to the all-important Electoral College, a change of only 42,918 votes in Wisconsin, Georgia and Arizona would have given Trump the 270 electoral votes needed to win a presidential election. That margin is smaller than the 77,000-plus votes that cost Hillary Clinton Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania four years earlier. Political scientists will be studying Trump's defeat for years to come, but it's very likely that one of the things these studies will show is that Trump lost because of incompetence. Not, as Trump would have it, through the incompetence of voters and voting machines, but his own ineptitude as a leader.

Trump's failure to acknowledge the gravity of the pandemic early on was not due to ignorance. We know that he was aware that it wasn't going to "[simply disappear](#)," even if he may not have been fully aware of how bad it would get if he didn't mobilize the federal government to move quickly and systematically impose best practices such as face masks and social distancing. Trump's failure to "worst case" the pandemic from the get-go is one of the unexplained mysteries of the pandemic in the US. My sense is that it was all about blame-avoidance. Trump focused more on how an "all-hands-on-deck" response to the unfolding crisis would impact the stock market than on the infection rate and death toll. This is why he pulled back on the federal throttle and delegated as much responsibility as possible to the states — so that Governors would take any blame from the infection rate and death count.

From the vantage point of practical politics, to paraphrase something often attributed to the famous French diplomat, [Talleyrand](#), it was worse than a crime; it was a mistake. That's because most Americans were more focused on the infection and death rate than on the stock market's ups and downs. In my view, if Trump had done more and done it sooner, voters would have been more forgiving. It wouldn't have guaranteed Trump's reelection, but if there is one thing that still gets you fired in the United States most of the time, it's incompetency. Trump's failure was a failure of competency. This is small comfort to the many American families who lost loved-ones because of Trump's gross negligence. But it is a reminder that in politics, competence matters.



“Lotte New York Palace Displays Stay Safe During COVID19 Quarantine New York City” by Anthony Quintano is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Beyond the pandemic, what other challenges has President Biden inherited from Donald Trump?

Trump’s mismanagement of the pandemic isn’t the only problem he’s left in Joe Biden’s inbox. He’s also handed him a foreign policy that commands little respect abroad, from America’s allies to be sure, but also its adversaries. The problems here are many and certainly, America’s poor performance in managing the pandemic has hurt it in the eyes of world opinion. But back home, the [central challenge facing Biden](#) on the foreign policy front lies elsewhere: it is to find a way to reconnect achievements in the international realm to recognizable benefits for average Americans. Trump talked a good game about this problem, but he arguably made it worse.

Biden has promised to rebuild support for American international engagement — he’s been telling everyone and anyone that will listen that “America’s back,” in case you hadn’t heard. For Biden to make good on this pledge, he needs to find ways to make what the US is doing abroad pay dividends once again for a broad cross-section of its citizens. This would be difficult in the best of times, but the pandemic makes it especially challenging.

In my view, Biden has to do several things on the international front to make good on his pledge, including [working more closely with allies](#) on climate, China, and human rights. But the single most important thing he needs to do is get the pandemic under control at home and leverage the crisis to rebuild the country’s infrastructure and create more non-tradeable jobs for working American families. This will go a long way toward easing domestic anxiety about American international engagement. The pandemic is a crisis, but like all crises, it is also an opportunity.

- This article is based on remarks Professor Trubowitz made at the event, [How the Pandemic Polarised Us](#), on 2 March 2021. [Watch a video recording of the event](#) [YouTube].

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About the author

**Peter Trubowitz** – *LSE US Centre*

Peter Trubowitz is Professor of International Relations, and Director of the LSE's US Centre. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on US party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America's changing place in the world.