

# The COVID-19 Pandemic, Donald Trump, and the Future of American Politics

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## **ABSTRACT**

The United States of America was disproportionately severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current crisis exposed significant flaws in the national health care system and provoked a serious socio-economic crisis. The health care scare overlaps with the ongoing presidential electoral campaign and the extreme political polarization of the country, leading to the politicization of discussions regarding the ways and means of resolving the health care crisis and complicating the process of decision making. The pandemic is also enhancing the autarchic tendencies in the US foreign policy and it's the increasingly anti-Chinese orientation that became visible during Donald Trump's White House tenure. Even under these circumstances, the American elites were able to negotiate several stabilization measures designed to deal with the medical and socio-economic aspects of the current crisis. Their willingness and ability to continue such collaboration in the future will have a direct bearing on the US socio-economic and political stability.

## **KEYWORDS**

*Pandemic, COVID-19, Coronavirus, USA, Donald Trump, Joseph Biden, Health Care*

The ongoing COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic exerts a serious and ever-increasing negative influence on countries' health care systems, economies, and politics worldwide, further aggravating the prolonged crisis of the liberal global order that was formed over the 30 years that have passed since the end of the Cold War. In the US, the current situation is further complicated by the Democratic Party's primaries and the forthcoming in November 2020 presidential and congressional elections, the attempts of President Donald Trump to reconfigure many aspects of the domestic political system and the basic principles on which the current international economic and political order was formed (ironically, under a strong American leadership), and the fierce resistance of the entrenched elites to these reform attempts.

Not just the Democratic Party elites – many other groups within the American establishment have viewed Donald Trump as a systemic threat to their power and privileges ever since he announced his bid for the presidency in 2015. Indeed, Trump's reforms and the ideas he stands for are designed to completely reshape many fundamental principles that have underpinned the US domestic and foreign policy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the start of the current century. Thus the ongoing healthcare calamity overlaps with the deep socio-economic and political crises the United States has been going through.

Respectively, the way the current crisis is resolved will have a direct impact on the state of the world economy and politics as well as the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election campaign, the evolution of the country's political system, and America's future role in the world.

### **The Pandemics and Their Societal Impact in Theory and Political Practice**

The possibility of a catastrophic worldwide pandemic and the scale of its potential impact on the international and the US economies and societies have been widely discussed in academic literature. A significant amount of research was dedicated to the lessons of the Hispanic Flu pandemic of the 1910s and the earlier pandemics known in history. In the second half of the last century, of particular interest to researchers were the regional epidemics and pandemics, including those related to SARS, Ebola, Swine Flu, Anthrax, or AIDS.<sup>1</sup> Studied were the ways to contain the spread of the virus, the potential preventative measures, including the role of vaccinations and the universal health care systems, and the impact of such catastrophic phenomena on the economic and political systems and societies of particular countries.<sup>2</sup> Some authors developed statistical models to analyze the spread of particular infections as well as their economic and societal impact.<sup>3</sup> With the end of the Cold War, many researchers have turned their attention to the related issues of the social and economic costs associated with potential technogenic and environmental catastrophes, climate changes, large-scale terrorist acts, and massive refugee flows.<sup>4</sup>

1 Boffey 1976; Cole 1996.

2 Langmuir 1963; Schoenbaum et al. 1976; Kavet 1977; Campbell et al. 1997.

3 Cliff et al. 1993.

4 Kaufmann et al. 1997; Cole 1996.

In particular, in an article published in 1999, M. I. Meltzer, N. J. Cox, and K. Fikuda discussed the possible effects of a future influenza pandemic in the United States, analyzed its potential economic effect, and evaluated the role of vaccine-based interventions. Relying on the death rates, hospitalization data, and outpatient visits, they estimated the potential toll at 89,000 to 207,000 deaths; 314,000 to 734,000 hospitalizations; 18 to 42 million outpatient visits; and 20 to 47 million additional illnesses. Patients at high risk (15% of the population) could account for approximately 84% of all deaths. The economic losses were estimated at \$71.3 billion to \$166.5 billion (in 1999 prices), excluding the disruptions to commerce and society. The authors concluded that vaccinating 60% of the population would generate the highest economic returns but may not be possible within the time required for vaccine effectiveness, especially if two doses of vaccine were required.<sup>1</sup>

And still, it turned out that neither the American political establishment nor the academia and the healthcare providers were fully prepared for the pandemic ravaging the US in 2020, especially for its political and socio-economic implications.

### The Pandemic Impact: The Initial Forecasts

The United States of America, the richest and strongest country of the modern world, has been disproportionately severely affected by the pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) data (generally somewhat lower than the national figures), as of May 6, 2020, the United States had 32.6% COVID-19 of the registered worldwide cases (1,171,185 of 3,588,773) that resulted in 25.3% deaths (62,698 of 247,503).<sup>2</sup> Within just twenty days, by May 26, the official WHO figures have grown to 1,618,757 cases (out of 5,370,375 worldwide, or 30.1%) and 96,909 deaths (out of 344,454, or 28.1%, worldwide).<sup>3</sup> Even though the US death ratio was somewhat lower than the world average (5.4% v. 6.9% on May 6 and 6.0% v. 6.4% on May 26), these figures pose serious questions about the archaic state of the US medical sphere: the *de facto* absence of a nationwide public healthcare system, the domination of for-profit private medicine, the Medieval-style corporate structure of the medical profession, the heavy reliance on the immigrant labor – in general and in the medical sphere in particular<sup>4</sup>, and the tremendous number of private health insurance carriers and plans – with the resulting absurdly high medical costs and the complexity of formulating and enforcing any coherent nationwide healthcare policies. While the United States health care expenditures are huge (reaching \$3.6 trillion in 2018, or \$11,172 per person. As a share of the nation's Gross Domestic Product, health spending accounted for

1 Meltzer et al. 1999, 659-71.

2 "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Situation report – 107," World Health Organization, May 6, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200506covid-19-sitrep-107.pdf?sfvrsn=159c3dc\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200506covid-19-sitrep-107.pdf?sfvrsn=159c3dc_2).

3 These figures are somewhat lower than those reported within the US. For instance, the US Centers for Disease Control reported 1,637,456 cases and 97,669 deaths as of May 25, 2020. For more information see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Cases in the U.S. Last Updated May 25, 2020," May 26, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html>; "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," World Health Organization, May 26, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us>.

4 At the beginning of 2020, the share of foreign-born employees in the US health care was 16.4% (2.8 million), reaching 31.6% in California and 34.3% in New York State. Among the nurses, the share of immigrant labor was 15.3%; medical aides, 25.3%; and physicians and surgeons, 28.2%. See: "Immigrant Healthcare Workers Are Critical in the Fight against Covid-19," New American Economy Research Fund, April 9, 2020, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/covid-19-immigrant-healthcare-workers/>.

17.7%<sup>1</sup>), a significant share of the population remains uninsured: even after the introduction in March 2010 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the so-called Obamacare), the number of the uninsured remained 30.1 million in 2018 (11.1% compared to 48.2 million or 18.2% in 2010).<sup>2</sup>

The situation is further aggravated by the existence of huge social and racial disparities in terms of frequency of infections and death ratios. The Centers for Disease Control, for example, reported that the African Americans, comprising 13% of the US population, account for 33% of those hospitalized with coronavirus infection. 45% of the infected are Whites and 8% are Latinos, "suggesting that black populations might be disproportionately affected by COVID-19." The coronavirus related mortality statistics show an even greater contrast: 70% of coronavirus deaths in Milwaukee have been African Americans, even though they accounted for less than a third of that city's population. Similarly, in Chicago, African Americans comprise 30% of the population but 69% of all coronavirus deaths; and in Louisiana, African Americans are 32% of the population but account for 70% of coronavirus deaths. In New York City, Latinos made up 34% of deaths despite being 29% of the population, while African Americans accounted for 28% of deaths, compared with 22% of the population.<sup>3</sup>

Respectively, the health care crisis has immediately acquired a political dimension and became a part of the global political struggle going way beyond the usual left-right divide on the future of health care reform in the United States. Indeed, the impact of the current crisis is felt way beyond the medical sphere. Throughout his tenure in the White House, Donald Trump has emphasized that his trump card was the excellent state of the American economy, which gave him hope not only to consolidate the support from those groups that supported him in the 2016 election (such as the representatives of big business in the real sector of the economy, first of all, the manufacturing and agriculture, the owners of small and medium-sized businesses, most of the White middle class, the military and the law enforcement servicemen). In particular, consistently declining were the unemployment rates: from 4.9% in 2016 (the last year of Obama's presidency) to 4.3% in 2017, 3.9% in 2018, and 3.5% in 2019. GDP (in market prices) grew by 1.6% in 2016 to 2.2% in 2017, 2.9% in 2018, and 2.7% in 2019.<sup>4</sup> In February 2020, the White House declared euphorically:

- "Nearly 7 million jobs have been created nationwide since President Trump's election, including more than 500,000 manufacturing jobs.
- Last year, the unemployment rate reached its lowest level in half a century.
- Unemployment rates for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Americans without a high school degree, and disabled Americans have logged record lows.
- The Trump economy is bringing workers off the sidelines after they were left behind for years.

1 "National Healthcare Expenditure Data," CMS.gov: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, May 18, 2020, accessed May 25, 2020, <https://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/NationalHealthExpendData/NationalHealthAccountsHistorical>.

2 Cohen et al. 2018.

3 Cheyenne Haslett, "CDC releases new data as debate grows over racial disparities in coronavirus deaths. Experts say more can be done now if there's more national data," ABC News, April 9, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/cdc-releases-data-debate-grows-racial-disparities-coronavirus/story?id=70041803>.

4 "Developments in Individual OECD and Selected Non-member Economies: the United States," OECD, accessed May 20, 2020, <http://www.oecd.org/economy/outlook/economic-forecast-summary-united-states-oecd-economic-outlook.pdf>.

- The prime-age labor force has expanded by 2.3 million under President Trump after shrinking by almost 1.6 million under the previous administration.
- Nearly 2.5 million Americans have been lifted out of poverty, including nearly 1.4 million children.”<sup>1</sup>

Trump claimed with enthusiasm: “In just three short years, we have shattered the mentality of American decline, and we have rejected the downsizing of America’s destiny.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, those whose economic situation has improved significantly as a result of the economic boom of the Trump years as well as benefitted from the protectionist foreign trade measures also included a significant proportion of the ethnic and racial minorities. All this has allowed Trump not only to consolidate his positions among those groups that supported him in 2015-2016 but also to begin to “lead away” large segments of minority voters from the Democrats. As long as the economic growth continued, Trump looked essentially invincible. His position was further enhanced by a weak (though pretty crowded simultaneously) field of contenders for the Democratic Party nomination and the leading position within it of the former Obama’s Vice President, the 77-year old Joseph (Joe) Biden – an ideal opponent for Trump.

Respectively, the economic collapse caused by the pandemic was expected to weaken the position of the President, giving the Democrats at least some semblance of hope for the victory in November, even in the absence of any formidable presidential candidates. Just within the two latter weeks of March, the Dow Jones, NASDAQ, and S&P indices lost all of the gains they made during the previous three years of Trump’s presidency and returned to their late-2016 levels, having decreased by more than 35% overall (regaining about a half of those losses in April). GDP production in the first quarter of 2020 was 4.8% lower than in the same period last year. The personal income in March 2020 has declined by 2%, the international trade volume, by \$44.4 billion.<sup>3</sup> The situation has become even more complicated due to the overlap of the current crisis with the recent oil price war, which was largely triggered initially by the tactical market game played by Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States: In mid-March 2020, before the impact of the pandemic started to be felt, Oxford Economics expected that the scaling back of the capital expenditure and investment resulting from the oil crisis could shave 0.3 percentage point off the US GDP.<sup>4</sup>

The International Monetary Fund’s April 2020 forecast expects the US economy to shrink by 5.9% in 2020. Even though this is relatively better than the expected EU average, – 7.5%,<sup>5</sup> it is clear that such an economic blow can carry with it significant social and political consequences. The touchiest politically issue is that of employment. In April, the unemployment rate increased by 10.3 percentage points – to 14.7%. This is the highest rate and the largest over-the-month increase since the start of the Great

1 “The Historic Results of President Donald J. Trump’s Economic Agenda,” The White House, February 20, 2020, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/historic-results-president-donald-j-trumps-economic-agenda/>.

2 Ibid.

3 “Principal Federal Economic Indicators,” Bureau of Economic Analysis. US Department of Commerce, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.bea.gov/news/glance>.

4 Peter Brennan, “Oil-price War Seen Exacerbating Slump in Global Economy,” S&P Global Market Intelligence, March 25, 2020, accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/oil-price-war-seen-exacerbating-slump-in-global-economy-57647691>.

5 The IMF expects the US economy to grow by 4.7% in 2021. For more information see the International Monetary Fund. “World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown,” accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>.

Depression. The number of unemployed persons rose by 15.9 million to 23.1 million in April. The unemployment rates rose sharply among all major worker groups. The rate was 13.0% for adult men, 15.5% for adult women, 31.9% for teenagers, 14.2% for Whites, 16.7% for Blacks, 14.5% for Asians, and 18.9% for Hispanics.<sup>1</sup> The overall number of people filing for unemployment benefits has exceeded 30 million. Goldman Sachs expects it to reach the share of the unemployed in the economically active population to reach 25%, repeating the record indicators of the Great Depression era (24.9% in 1933). Taking into account the underemployed and those who gave up on a job search, the real figure could reach 35%,<sup>2</sup> raising the fears of rising social tensions and conflicts.

### **The Expectations v. the Emerging Reality**

This situation was making the Democrats hopeful at the beginning of the current crisis that, instead of getting credit for the economic expansion of 2017-2019, the President could be hurt by the economic collapse. Besides that, Trump's opponents hoped that he could be accused of ineffective leadership in dealing with the health care crisis. The Coronavirus scare could also strengthen the left's hand in its drive to create a first truly nationwide public health care system. And finally, the crisis was allowing the Democratic Party officials to circumvent the primaries' procedures, railroading to victory the establishment's favorite – the elderly Joe Biden. Moreover, the intense pressure has been levied at Biden's main challenger, the left-wing Socialist senator, 78-year old Bernie Sanders (whom the Party bosses hated and were afraid of no less than of Trump), to immediately exit the race. The crisis was also offering them a chance to protect the increasingly senile and visibly disoriented Biden from any direct interaction with the electorate and the media (to say nothing of having him on a debate podium facing Donald Trump directly). For Biden, who does not shine with either physical health or mental acuity, this could be a lifesaver. Respectively, one can expect further attempts by the Democratic leadership to prevent Biden's direct debates with President Trump, the debates that, for the elderly and dull-witted Democratic candidate, could turn out to be a true "kiss of death".

While many of these expectations seemed to be quite logical, the reality turned out to be very different. In particular, Donald Trump has again demonstrated his ability to get mobilized and change his behavior during the moments of crisis. The President, who had an adversarial relationship with the mainstream media and ignored its representatives for years, started to have daily news conferences, interacting with journalists for hours, travelling around the country, meeting with state officials and business and societal leaders and demonstrating that he was in charge and was willing to take responsibility upon himself.

This represents a sharp contrast with the behavior of Joe Biden, who, in addition to his general physical and mental weakness, has surprised even many of his supporters by a cowardly behavior – hiding in a basement of his home in Delaware and avoiding any direct contact with the outside world. All attempts by the apparatchiks of the

1 "The Employment Situation – April 2020," News Release, May 8, 2020, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empisit.pdf>.

2 Matt Egan, "Goldman Sachs Issues Warning About US Unemployment," CNN Business, May 13, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/13/economy/jobs-unemployment-rate-goldman-sachs/index.html>.



Democratic Party and the mainstream media to airbrush his image, organize the likeness of his speeches and press conferences *via* Skype, allowing him to read the prepared answers, have failed to produce the desired results. Biden's behavior sharply contrasts not only with that of Trump – it differs sharply from the actions of several other politicians, including many members of Congress and Governors, among whom are the Democratic Governors of New York Andrew Cuomo and California's Gavin Newsom. Not surprisingly, there is growing criticism of Biden among the Democrats, including the vocal proposals to replace him with a more effective candidate, for example, New York's Andrew Cuomo, who is actively working now in the media space and is rapidly gaining popularity among the Democrats. Meanwhile, the widely advertised Biden's promise to nominate a woman as his running mate has further limited the freedom of man oeuvre both for him and for the Party leadership, making it impossible to put Cuomo on the ticket (who could become then the Party's candidate in case if Biden's inability to run an effective campaign becomes all too obvious). The situation for Biden is further aggravated by a series of corruption, power abuse, and sexual scandals that can start snowballing after he gets the official Party nomination. Given the rigid primary selection system and the fact that Party bureaucrats seem to have settled on Biden's candidacy, it would be very hard to push for a change at the top of the Democratic ticket without a devastating scandal.

Particularly disappointing for the Democrats was that, according to the April 14-28 2020 Gallup poll, Trump's activity as president was generally approved by 49% of respondents (compared to 44% two weeks earlier), including 93% of Republicans, 47% of Independents, and 8% of Democrats.<sup>1</sup> The dynamics of the public approval of the President's actions in dealing specifically with the pandemic is more controversial: on March 13-22, 60% of respondents approved of the President's actions amid the current crisis (only 43% approved of his actions two weeks before that). Among them were a number of senior representatives of the Democratic Party, including some Governors, who were forced to recognize the effectiveness of the White House actions. Overall, Trump's work was approved by 94% of Republicans: 60% of independent voters, and even 27% of Democrats. Meanwhile, the next poll has shown that support for the President's actions has slipped to 50% (respectively, 91%, 50%, and 11% among the Republicans, Independents, and Democrats).<sup>2</sup>

Still, the Republican electorate shows a very high degree of enthusiasm for its candidate – this stands in sharp contrast with the lukewarm attitude of the Democrats towards Joe Biden. Emerson Poll has found that Trump has a sizable 19-point advantage in the enthusiasm gap over Biden, 64%-45%. Some 36% of the President's supporters said they were "extremely excited" to vote for Trump, and 28% said they were "very excited." For Biden, those numbers were 22% and 23%.<sup>3</sup> An even more dangerous trend consists of many "progressives" – the left-wingers who supported

1 "Presidential Approval Ratings – Donald Trump," Gallup, May, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/203198/presidential-approval-ratings-donald-trump.aspx>.

2 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans Divided on Trump's Handling of COVID-19 Situation," Gallup, April 30, 2020, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/309593/americans-divided-trump-handling-covid-situation.aspx>.

3 Paul Bedard, "19-Point Enthusiasm Gap: Trump Supporters Jazz to Vote, Biden's 'Meh'," Washington Examiner, April 29, 2020, accessed April 30, 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/washington-secrets/19-point-enthusiasm-gap-trump-supporters-jazzed-to-vote-bidens-meh>.

Senator Bernie Sanders during the primary season – openly expressing their skepticism about the tentative Party nominee. The recent polls show that more than one in five Sanders supporters don't plan to vote for Biden, while six out of ten say they are “not very excited” or “not excited at all” about his nomination.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, exactly the fact that about 20% of Sanders' supporters either did not vote for Hillary Clinton or voted for Donald Trump in the hotly contested Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania in 2016 has cost Hillary the election.

### The Policy Implications

For the Democrats, Trump's relative success in dealing with the pandemic and the economic crisis associated with it might have very unpleasant political consequences. Considering the extreme polarization of the country, the crisis situation can lead to a further escalation of political tensions, significantly complicating the formulation and execution of a coherent governmental policy in terms of dealing with the pandemic and its socio-economic consequences.

Besides the electoral considerations, the task of fighting the pandemic is further worsened by the constitutional disagreements in regard to the division of powers among the federal, state, and local governments (including their ability to use the federal funds). The conflict also has a purely ideological dimension – conservative Republican President has to deal with a large number of liberal Democratic Governors being in charge of states that turned out to be the most affected by the Coronavirus, in particular, New York, California, Michigan, Washington. They have very different views on the goals, methods, and role of government in resolving the crisis.

Regarding the first issue, following a month-long tag of war, the President has agreed to transfer a significant share of responsibility to state and local governments. This action has opened the door to a significant intergovernmental policy differentiation based on specific regional conditions and the ideological positions of the local governments.

Ironically, regardless of the ideological differences between the White House and the Democrats, in a vein similar to the Great Depression era, the solutions offered up to this point and accepted by both sides of the political spectrum have led to a serious strengthening of the socio-economic role of the state: the CARES (The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act, a package of measures adopted by Congress and signed by the President, which went into effect on 27 March 2020, provided for the allocation of \$2.2 trillion dollars to combat the crisis. These measures were aimed at solving the problems in three main areas:

- medical (a sharp increase in the production of ventilators, medical masks and disinfectants as well as sponsoring the medical and pharmaceutical research, the development of drugs and vaccines, and providing \$100 billion for the construction of new, temporary, and the renovation and expansion of the existing hospitals);

1 Justin Vallejo, “2020 election: Joe Biden could lose to Trump if he fails to win over Bernie Sanders supporters, campaign adviser warns,” The Independent, May 15, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election/2020-election-joe-biden-bernie-sanders-trump-a9517691.html>.



- personal, involving the direct payments of \$1,200 to all Americans, earning up to \$75,000 (or \$150,000 for a family), and an additional \$500 per child. Payments to higher earners (those with an annual income of up to \$99,000) are to be prorated. The Act has substantially expanded the jobless aid, providing an additional 13 weeks and a four-month enhancement of benefits – a \$600-per-week boost in unemployment insurance, and extended the payments for the first time to freelancers and gig workers – worth more than \$500 billion overall;

- business-oriented, including \$377 billion in federally guaranteed loans to small businesses and the establishment of a \$500 billion government lending program for distressed companies reeling from the impact of the crisis, including allowing the government to take equity stakes in airlines that received aid to help compensate the taxpayers.<sup>1</sup>

The adoption of this package and a number of other measures, including an agreement on reducing the oil production, has made it possible to soften the negative impact on the economy and American citizens. Still, the adoption of the bill involved significant disagreements in regard to who the recipients of the aid should be. In particular, the Republicans emphasized that assistance should go first of all to businesses as the creators of new value and jobs while the Democrats demanded that assistance had to be directed primarily towards the local governments and the less advantaged population groups. While both parties agreed on the need to support small businesses, the Democrats insisted that priority had to be given to minority business owners. They were able to put in the text of the bill a number of “their” proposals.

In particular, the bill allocated \$100 million for additional rural broadband and \$150 million for the arts and humanities grants to bring cultural programming to Americans stuck at home. It increased funding for domestic violence shelters and hotlines and set aside \$425 million to deal with mental health and substance abuse disorders related to the pandemic. \$400 million became available to “protect and expand voting for the 2020 election cycle.” \$3.5 billion were given to states to prop up child care facilities and allow universities to keep paying students in federal work-study jobs even if their academic terms have been cut short.<sup>2</sup>

Thus on the one hand, the degree of both the federal and the local governments’ involvement in the economic and social spheres has increased significantly. This trend was further enhanced by the invocation by the President of the 1950 Defense Production Act, allowing the federal government’s interference into the private business activities, and strict limits introduced temporarily on the immigration (including family-based migration and the admission of the refugees). On the other hand, also visibly increased the amount and degree of federal debt.

With the passing of the initial shock and November elections coming closer, the disagreements between the two parties in regard to the future ways of dealing with the crisis will inevitably escalate. The first signs of that are the Congressional hearings held by the Democrats in the House of Representatives and the political clashes over the newly proposed anticrisis measures. In particular, the more than 1,800-page long

1 Emily Cochrane and Nicholas Fandos, “The Senate Approves \$2 Trillion Stimulus After Bipartisan Deal,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/us/politics/coronavirus-senate-deal.html>.

2 Ibid.

HEROES (Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions) Act, passed by the Democratic majority of the House of Representatives in May 2020, is guaranteed to encounter a serious resistance in the Republican-controlled Senate as well as from the White House. Worth more than \$3 trillion, it is designed to provide \$500 billion in direct assistance to state governments to counter the fiscal impact of the pandemic, \$375 billion to assist local governments, \$20 billion to tribal governments, and \$20 billion to US territories.<sup>1</sup>

If adopted, the bill would establish a \$200 billion "Heroes' Fund" to ensure that essential workers receive hazard pay. Their employers would be able to apply for grants to provide a \$13 per hour premium pay for their workers on top of regular wages. These employers would be eligible for grants of \$10,000 per worker, or \$5,000 for highly compensated essential workers. Another provision of the bill would appropriate \$850 million for states to provide child and family care for essential workers. The bill would also offer to fund for personal protective equipment for emergency health care and essential workers. The proposal would extend a \$600-per-week boost in unemployment insurance established under the CARES Act until January 2021 to help millions who have lost jobs during the pandemic. The legislation would extend the existing student loan payment plans established in the CARES Act, which did not cover private loan borrowers. It would provide up to \$10,000 in debt relief to be applied to a private student loan, to be paid in monthly installments by the Treasury Department until September 2021. The proposal calls for an additional \$75 billion for coronavirus testing, contact tracing and isolation measures. It also intends to ensure that all Americans could receive free coronavirus treatment. The bill would provide \$50 million in assistance to farmers, farmers markets and local food outlets affected by market disruptions, as well as another \$50 billion to beginning farmers and ranchers. It would also provide \$16.5 billion in direct payments to agricultural producers. The legislation designates \$100 billion in emergency assistance to low-income renters to help them avoid eviction. It would also provide \$75 billion to states, territories and tribes to help homeowners with direct assistance with mortgage payments and other housing costs. The bill would implement the second round of direct payments to Americans to assist with the fallout of the pandemic. It would provide \$1,200 to every family member, including children, up to \$6,000 per household. The HEROES Act gives \$25 billion in assistance to the Postal Service, which is expected to run out of money by late September without congressional assistance. The bill allocates \$3.6 billion in grants to states for planning and preparation of elections, as well as to bolster election security. Several progressive groups have called for election assistance to be included in the next coronavirus relief bill.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, it is clear already today that, on the one hand, the ideological divide between the parties in regard to the ways of dealing with the crisis keeps growing, complicating the adoption of this or any other future legislative acts. It is also obvious that the adoption of relief packages cannot solve the problem on its own. The exclusive

1 "House Democrats' \$3 Trillion Relief Bill?" CBS News, May 13, 2020, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-relief-package-heroes-act-3-trillion-bill-house-democrats/>.

2 "Making emergency supplemental appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2020, and for other purposes," 116th Congress (2019-2020). 2nd Session, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20200511/BILLS-116hr6800ih.pdf>; Grace Segers, "What's in the House Democrats' \$3 Trillion Relief Bill?" CBS News, May 13, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-relief-package-heroes-act-3-trillion-bill-house-democrats/>.

reliance on such measures would lead, among other problems, to significant growth of public debt. The President's growing concern involves precisely the economic consequences of the crisis. Increasingly, he supports the movement towards the reopening of the economy and lifting the limits on public life, frequently ignoring the health experts' recommendations. Trump is also entertaining various proposals as to how the country can boost its economic growth again.

Ironically, many such proposals could also come from the liberal Keynesian textbook and lead to the further strengthening of the governmental role in both the economic and the socio-political spheres. In particular, a return to the idea of two years ago is possible, when the President offered the Democrats the adoption of a program for the development of transport infrastructure with a total price tag of more than \$1.5 trillion. At that time, the proposal was blocked due to both the conceptual differences and the Democrats' unwillingness to support any initiative that could increase Trump's ratings. Today, however, this Keynesian, in its essence, the project could be capable of stimulating the economy on the basis of state-generated demand and creating millions of jobs. Sabotaging it could bring very painful political consequences for an opponent.

### **The Long-Term Consequences?**

Besides the pandemic's devastating impact on the US health care system, social and economic life, and political stability, the current crisis has intensified and, in a number of instances, legitimized some significant societal trends, which were *de facto* emerging earlier. Many cause serious apprehension on the part of both academics and social activists. Among them:

- the expansion of state controls over various spheres of public and private life with the use of modern technology. On a number of instances, the attempts by the local governments to impose such control mechanisms on society have caused significant public irritation and protests, including those of the armed citizens. Governments on all levels took note on that, starting to lift the limits on economic activity and social interactions already at the beginning of May;

- the temporary transfer of school and university education to an on-line format. While many school systems have already announced the return to a normal format in the Fall (while simultaneously the others, such as the largest in the US California State University system, declared their intention to continue working online until at least the end of 2020), it is expected that the impact of the crisis on the educational sphere might be significant and permanent, leading to the expansion of online education, the weakening of the tenure institution, and the general lowering of the educational and research standards and quality;

- the increasing share of the online retail and services and the quick expansion of the number of those working from home. These trends can lead to a significant restructuring of the labor market and a large wave of bankruptcies of retail, service, and other business entities;

- the strengthening of trends towards the establishment of direct democracy on the basis of voting via the *Internet* and the direct interaction of political leaders with the electorate, resulting, in particular, in the increasingly populist character of American politics;

- a similar populist trend resulting from the growing political polarization and the newly emerging *ad hoc* mass protest movements, increasingly involving protesters openly carrying arms;
- the tightening of controls in the immigration sphere with a consistent shift towards the preferential treatment given to the elite immigrants simultaneously with a crackdown on the low-qualified and undocumented migrants, family-based migration, and the admission of refugees;
- the enhancement of the anti-globalist backlash of the recent years, involving the return to a classical, absolute understanding of state sovereignty and the strengthening of the autarchic economic tendencies, including an increasingly skeptical view on the intergovernmental organizations and INGOs; and
- the growing tensions with China viewed increasingly as an ascending superpower challenging the hegemonic position of the United States in the world. For those adhering to this point of view, the pandemic represents a convenient moment to enhance the anti-Chinese rhetoric and push for cutting the bilateral economic ties and the introduction of various sanctions designed to slow down the advancement of that country's economic power.

The seriousness of the pandemic consequences has been highlighted by the events surrounding the killing of the African American, George Floyd, by a White police officer on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The explosion of public anger and the massive demonstrations, involving clashes with the police and numerous pogroms and acts of vandalism were the result of the extreme polarization of American society of the Trump years, the aggressive elite media campaign, the growing social gap, and the pattern of the police abuse and killings of African Americans in the US. Simultaneously, these events were indicative of tensions resulting from the quarantine and the social isolation as well as the desperation of those losing jobs, incomes, and businesses. The resulting riots also sent a strong signal to the elites regarding the potential political costs of pandemics and the restrictive measures imposed on society. It is also expected that the overlap of the pandemic with the riots would further aggravate the economic situation, further complicating the post-crisis recovery.

### The Foreign Policy Implications

Among the aforementioned pandemic related trends, three latter ones fully correspond to Donald Trump's worldview and the policies he's been pursuing during his White House tenure and are aimed at the radical revision of the US geopolitical priorities. These, in particular, include the tightening of controls in the immigration sphere with a consistent shift towards the preferential treatment given to elite immigrants (academic personnel, other highly qualified migrants in select professional fields, students, and "investment" migrants) along with the increasingly discriminatory approach towards all the other categories of migrants, especially the undocumented ones (the latter's number is estimated currently at around 11 million<sup>1</sup>).

1 Pasel, Cohn 2017.

From the very start, Trump declared the “America First” principle, espousing the return to a traditional understanding of the state sovereignty concept. This has meant, in particular, the increasingly negative view on the role of the major international organizations, including the UN, the WTO, NATO as well as such functional organizations as WHO.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the President’s advisors consider the globalization system, incrementally built in the initial post Cold War period on the basis of such mechanisms as the World Trade Organization and designed to create economic advantages for the largest and (presumed at that time to be) the most effective, American economy, to be now more of a liability than an advantage for the U.S. In Trump’s view, at present, this system benefits China instead of the U.S. and should be destroyed or at least modified significantly.

His approach has relied on a less interventionist and ideologically motivated foreign and military policy and involved the emphasis on the ongoing geopolitical shift towards the Pacific region along with viewing China as the major and quickly growing political, economic, and military threat to the United States. In particular, Trump’s campaign advisor Steve Bannon claimed: “The economic war with China is everything. And we have to be maniacally focused on that. If we continue to lose it, we’re five years away, I think, ten years at the most, of hitting an inflection point from which we’ll never be able to recover... One of us is going to be a hegemon in 25 or 30 years and it’s gonna be them if we go down this path.”<sup>2</sup>

This has further reinforced his desire to take steps aimed at weakening China (including the improvement of the U.S.-Russia relations), and protecting the American industry and agriculture from what he viewed as unfair competition, by rebuilding the economic protectionist barriers, eliminating the diversity immigration lottery, and cutting the scale of both family-based migration and refugee flow. Viewing China as the major threat to U.S. interests, Trump is willing to destroy or at least significantly weaken those global institutions that were formed or expanded during the last thirty years. In his view, these agreements and structures, designed initially to give advantage to the U.S., at present favor China and several other countries.

The ongoing pandemic was perceived by the President both as a proof of correctness of his vision and an opportune moment for raising tensions with China to block its further advancement through some kind of a new “containment” policy. Thus we are witnessing numerous statements by the administration officials accusing China of an ineffective response to the pandemic, hiding the relevant information, conducting secret biological experiments and the like. Simultaneously, the White House is incrementally withdrawing from important international treaties and increasing the pressure on the major international organizations. This seems

1 The latest expression of this trend was Donald Trump’s sharp criticism of the World Health Organization’s reaction to the pandemic, accusing WHO of acting under the pressure from China and threatening to withhold \$118 million of the US membership dues – in addition to more than \$90 million the country already owes the organization from the last year. Meanwhile, US dues account for about a quarter of the annual fees the WHO assesses to all 194 of its member states. See David Welna, “US Was Behind on Payments to WHO Before Trump’s Cutoff,” National Public Radio, May 7, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/07/850326053/u-s-was-behind-on-payments-to-who-before-trumps-cutoff>; “Statement of Account. United States of America: As at 31 January 2020,” World Health Organization, accessed May 15, 2020, [https://www.who.int/about/finances-accountability/funding/account\\_statement/2020/usa\\_en\\_2020.pdf?ua=1](https://www.who.int/about/finances-accountability/funding/account_statement/2020/usa_en_2020.pdf?ua=1).

2 “Steve Bannon Says the U.S. is already in an ‘Economic War’ with China,” CNBC, August 16, 2017, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/16/steve-bannon-says-the-us-is-already-in-an-economic-war-with-china.html>.

to be a risky strategy that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy by provoking an angry Chinese reaction, worsening relations with the allies, weakening the existing international regimes, and causing further resistance on the part of the established elites within the US.

### **The Post Crisis Future: Are the Changes to Stay?**

The current pandemic has hit the United States exactly at a time when that country has entered a deep system-wide crisis reminiscent in many respects of the developments in the latter days of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the current situation is further complicated by the ongoing technological changes. Modern technology and the structural changes in American society played a major role in the emergence of the Donald Trump phenomenon and his ascendance to the White House in November 2016. For better or worse, Trump has been trying to offer his vision of structural reforms in an attempt to avoid such systemic collapse. Nevertheless, both his person and policies were from the very start viewed with suspicion and encountered fierce resistance on the part of the political establishment. Indeed, the Coronavirus crisis comes in the footsteps of its endless and unrelenting attempts to remove the President from office, or at the very least, to discredit or intimidate him, whatever the price of such actions for the country could be.

In this sense, the national elite has been remarkably consistent in repeating almost every mistake committed by the Soviet Communist apparatchiks during the Perestroika years, including their endless attempts to prevent Boris Yeltsin's rise to power, persisting, just like the Soviet bureaucrats, in a delusion that Trump's ascendance was a mere accident of history – respectively, if they managed to throw him out of office, history could resume its natural course. After all, for them, the existing is perceived as the pinnacle of the Creation that has to stay forever, while any attempts to question its effectiveness and moral superiority are to be treated as a sign of mental deficiency or criminal intent.

This approach and the growing political and ideological polarization in the country could prevent the achievement of consensus in regard to the ways and means of dealing with the ongoing crisis and creating the mechanisms designed to prevent its repetition in the future. Still, the current situation generates a unique opportunity for the opposing sides to start cooperating in order to resolve the crisis and introduce significant systemic reforms – as it happened on a number of decisive moments in the US history, including Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s and Johnson's Great Society in the 1960s. Ironically, in both of those instances, the reforms led to a drastic expansion of the government's social, economic and political power. In particular, many Democrats, especially members of the leftist, "progressive" wing of the Party, hope that the pandemic calamity would lead to the changes in public opinion, supporting their push for a nationwide public health care system.

The adopted stabilization packages and the ongoing expansion of the government's redistributive role in the socio-economic sphere show that consensus, at least on a limited scale, is possible. The most recent economic forecasts also predict stabilization



and the resumption of economic growth already in the third quarter of 2020.<sup>1</sup> Time will tell if American history repeats itself in 2020, leading to significant systemic reforms, or the petty political considerations and the logic of electoral politics would prevent it from happening. In the latter case, the health care crisis can turn into a serious socio-economic and political disaster.

- 1 See, for instance, the statement by Jason Furman, Harvard University Professor and the former Obama's White House Council of Economic Advisors Chair. Such an economic improvement could also guarantee Donald Trump's easy reelection for a second term in November 2020. Ryan Lizza and Daniel Lippman, "The General Election Scenario that Democrats Are Dreading," *Politico*, May 26, 2020, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/05/26/2020-election-democrats-281470?fbclid=IwAR2vGHNmBrRpGUM4MAsZl-b4sx5KFxf3A2YybWNTdQx2bbqoAm1XxppWfA>.

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# Пандемия COVID-19, Дональд Трамп и будущее Америки

## АННОТАЦИЯ

Пандемия COVID-19 спровоцировала в Соединенных Штатах Америки серьезный социально-экономический кризис и выявила существенные недостатки в национальной системе здравоохранения. Усложняет ситуацию продолжающаяся президентская избирательная кампания, которая стала причиной политической поляризации страны, активизировав дискуссии о путях и средствах разрешения кризиса в области здравоохранения и усложнив процесс принятия ключевых решений. Пандемия также выявила автаркические тенденции во внешней политике США и ее все усиливающуюся антикитайскую ориентацию, которая стала заметной во время пребывания Дональда Трампа в Белом доме. Но даже в этих условиях американские элиты смогли договориться о ряде медицинских и социально-экономических стабилизационных мер, направленных на преодоление негативных последствий текущего кризиса. В перспективе именно их готовность и способность продолжать такое сотрудничество напрямую повлияет на социально-экономическую и политическую стабильность США.

## КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

*Пандемия, COVID-19, коронавирус, США, Дональд Трамп,  
Джозеф Байден, здравоохранение*

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