

Are populist leaders a liability during COVID-19?

April 8 2020, by Jonatan A Lassa and Miranda Booth



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The [rise of populism](#) around the world—such as in the United States, Brazil and Indonesia—has partly contributed to the global failure to adequately respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and has led the world

into a recession [faster than anticipated](#).

By April 8, the World Health Organisation [reported](#) more than 1.2 million confirmed cases and 72,000 deaths from COVID-19. So far 211 countries and territories have been affected. The worst case scenario suggests the potential of negative economic growth, [including in East Asian and Pacific economies](#).

Populism can be understood [as an ideology](#) organized around two core beliefs:

1. anti-establishment society is divided into two opposing groups: "the people" (pure) and "the elite" (corrupt)
2. politics should express the "general will" of "the people."

Populist leaders suggest they alone represent the people's will, and can solve threats to society on the people's behalf. Because populism is a thin political ideology, leaders on the left and right of the political spectrum will express [different variants of populism](#). They can do so by identifying socio-cultural threats to society such as immigration or socio-economic threats such as globalisation.

Nonetheless, we have observed common qualities in the way populist leaders across the political spectrum have handled the COVID-19 outbreak such as their optimistic bias and complacency, ambiguity and ignorance of science. These qualities make them unfit to manage emerging crises.

And with the superpower, the United States, being governed by a populist leader that has returned to isolationism, global health security is at stake. The declining US leadership under President Donald Trump has undermined crisis management and put the world at risk.

1. Optimistic bias

We expect leaders to be able to [anticipate events](#), so they understand them and act in a timely fashion.

But, in the current COVID-19 pandemic, populist leaders have been excessively optimistic when judging their competence in responding to the pandemic.

They have shown themselves to be susceptible to complacency, a form of [cognitive bias](#) that makes someone believe they are less likely than others to be hit by emerging crises.

When images of the initial COVID-19 epidemic emerged from China and were splashed across global screens and social media walls in January 2020, [Trump in the US](#), [Prime Minister Boris Johnson in UK](#) and [President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo in Indonesia](#) were naively optimistic the virus would not affect their countries.

Despite its enormous capacity, the Trump administration's [delayed response](#) to containing COVID-19, by creating timely fiscal policy, allocating resources and putting in place mitigation measures in January and February, caused the number of cases in the US to surge to the highest globally.

Likewise, Jokowi's administration practically [ignored warnings](#) in the beginning of the outbreak, dragging its feet in preparing the health system, including health testing facilities. As a result, Indonesia has come to have one of the highest mortality rates (above 8%) from COVID-19 in the world.

In contrast, governments such as Germany, Canada and New Zealand, took less time to act. Germany conducted [aggressive COVID-19 testing](#)

(at a rate of 160,000 tests per week), helping the country identify cases earlier. There, the mortality rate has remained at around [1.6%](#). A broad testing strategy also helped Canada keep its mortality rate at 1.8%. New Zealand has consistently conducted tests and keep its mortality rate far [below 1%](#).

2. Leadership ambiguity

Populist leaders, such as Trump or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, have an incentive to [mobilize fake news and misinformation](#) campaigns, as they are not capable of adopting evidence-based deliberation as a strategy. Their ignorance of science reaches a point where truth and lies have no clear boundaries.

In catastrophes, the use of such ambiguity to promote a political agenda is magnified.

Instead of showing commitment to the evidence and listening to subject-matter experts, Trump distracted the American public by employing a symbolic response to COVID-19—he [declared a national prayer day on March 15](#).

Top Indonesian officials have similarly used [religious texts and blind faith to calm people](#), while delaying measures to deal with the epidemic. Indonesia [delayed its response](#) for 45 days after the Wuhan lockdown.

Brazil's Bolsonaro labeled the COVID-19 pandemic a ["little flu," a "media trick" and an "absurd"](#) campaign intended to force him out of power.

3. Ignorance for science

Populist governments are infamous for ["silencing" science](#). This is because evidence-based policy is not compatible with their approach to public policy.

Research suggests populist governments' tendency to deny scientific knowledge around complex issues, such as health and the environment, for economic and political gain is [deeply entrenched](#).

The Indonesian government, for example, actively [restrict research and researchers](#) to protect their economic and political interests.

In a global pandemic like COVID-19, populist leaders like [Trump](#) have been hesitant to reverse course and allow scientific knowledge to guide their decisions in mitigating the health crisis.

When these leaders finally acknowledge scientific advice, the public was burdened with the high costs of implementing extreme policy measures. Because policy reversal has often been too late, the most plausible and easiest option to contain COVID-19 is to enforce draconian measures.

For example, delayed actions to contain COVID-19 that led to the dramatic spikes of deaths pushed Italy's government—made up of [an uneasy coalition](#) between the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and the center-left Democratic Party—to impose severe restrictions, enforced by [police and the military](#).

Read more: Indonesia was in denial over coronavirus. Now it may be facing a looming disaster

Decline of US global leadership

With a populist leader at the helm of the US government, we're seeing a floundering of US leadership on the global health stage. Unlike the 2014

Ebola crisis in West Africa, where US leadership during president Barack Obama's tenure was praised as [pivotal to the response](#), such leadership is missing from the present pandemic.

The US [has announced](#) a US\$2 trillion stimulus packages to save its economy. But funding for the COVID-19 global response from USAID is [relatively low \(US\\$37 million\)](#), with reports aid funding will need to be redirected from existing projects, such as the Global Fund for HIV, TB and malaria.

Many observers, including academics from around the world, might believe the US is a place where legitimate institutions such as the [Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#) can inspire global leadership on pandemic management and response.

But having such an enormous capacity does not lead to resilience because weak leadership drives institutions and communities in vulnerable directions. Trump has [failed to establish](#) the principal value that life is more valuable than money and the economy.

Not only is weak US leadership potentially pivotal in the global failure to act, it may herald a repetition of complacency in global health security in the future.

Can populists capitalize on the pandemic?

Populist leaders' capacity to capitalize on crises for political gains can be seen from Trump's recent [high approval ratings](#).

Populist leaders could capitalize on the knowledge uncertainty around COVID-19 and use it to amplify discriminatory narratives on migration and border issues to discredit progressive opponents.

As a [recession looms](#), voters should resist the tendency to bolster populist parties globally. Voters should be attuned to populist leaders' tactics to [divide a threatened public from trusting established institutions](#) that have effective solutions.

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