

New research reveals political changes wrought by the 'Black Death'

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Inspired by the Black Death, “The Dance of Death,” was a common painting motif in the late medieval period. (Illustrations from the Nuremberg Chronicle by Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514))

From 1347 to 1351, Europe was in the grip of a pandemic, later known

as the "Black Death," that killed millions, leaving doctors struggling to understand its origins and cities struggling to bury the dead and isolate the sick.

The [political legacy](#) of that pandemic, two University of Virginia researchers write in a new paper, lingered more than 500 years after the disease struck—well into the late 19th century. Their research could tell us something about how modern pandemics, including the current coronavirus pandemic, can shape the [political landscape](#) for years to come.

Associate professor of politics Daniel Gingerich and postdoctoral research associate Jan Vogler focused on the region that is now Germany, where the [bubonic plague](#)'s impact varied widely. Harder-hit [geographic areas](#), they find, experienced a fundamental reconfiguration of political and socioeconomic structures, while locations with milder outbreaks mostly maintained existing political and [economic conditions](#).

There are, of course, several key differences between the Black Death and COVID-19. For one, the Black Death is estimated to have reduced Europe's population by somewhere between 30% to 60%; in contrast, total deaths so far attributed to COVID-19 today in the United States are equal to about 0.03% of the population. Medicine has also advanced light-years beyond what it was in [medieval times](#), and doctors today are much better able to diagnose, treat and research diseases.

Still, Gingerich and Vogler, who began researching the Black Death several months before the first COVID-19 cases emerged in China, say their work has taken on a new timeliness. Their research was supported by the CLEAR Lab, part of the UVA Democracy Initiative's focus on ethics and corruption. Gingerich is the co-director of the lab and Vogler is one of its research associates.

We spoke with them to discuss what they learned about the devastating 14th-century plague, and what it can tell us about our own time.

Q. What changes did you see in areas historically hit hard by the Black Death?

Gingerich: Our conceptual framework is that pandemics can have long-term political legacies, to the extent that the mortality they produce is large enough and drastic enough to restrict the [labor market](#). In the hardest-hit areas of German-speaking Central Europe—mostly the western parts of what is now called Germany—the plague caused a major labor shortage.

At that time, Europe's economy was built on serfdom, relying on agricultural workers who had customary labor obligations to lords in charge of manors and farms. The plague radically reduced the size of this labor force, which meant there were fewer laborers to satisfy demand and, consequently, those left could negotiate for higher wages from competing lords, or flee to urban or other rural areas with [higher wages](#). The wages and living standards of laborers increased substantially in the years after the plague, contributing to the erosion of the institution of serfdom.

Gradually, those workers who had more freedom in the economic sphere also found more freedom in the political sphere, and we see more inclusive political institutions adopted in localities where there was significant Black Death mortality. This was in part because the social and economic position of previously disadvantaged groups had substantially improved, giving those groups greater political bargaining power. In the long run, voters in these areas acted more independently, choosing [political parties](#) that they wanted to support—often less conservative, traditional parties.

Q. What about areas that experienced less severe outbreaks?

Gingerich: In areas where Black Death mortality was not particularly high, agricultural elites had the capacity to respond to minor labor shortages by doubling down on coercion. Rather than opening the labor market, they maintained the strictures of serfdom for a longer period of time.

As a long-term consequence, ownership of land remained highly unequal well into the 19th century, and we saw elite-dominated politics instead of more participatory political institutions. At the dawn of mass politics, this meant that voters acted more deferentially, voting for political parties, in particular Imperial Germany's Conservative Party, that the traditional agrarian elite preferred and directed them to vote for.

Q. You traced those effects through to the 19th century, when mass politics began to emerge. What did you find?

Vogler: We found variation in three distinct outcomes. First, the Conservative Party, which wanted to defend highly hierarchical socioeconomic structures, was strongest in areas where the plague had not fundamentally reconfigured economy and society. This specific party was also well-known for its use of clientelism, intimidation and coercion to achieve electoral victories, which was possible primarily in areas that did not have a history of democratic participation or more inclusive political institutions.

Second, we saw that land inequality persisted more in areas hit less hard by the Black Death. There, a small group of powerful elites continued to control a large share of the agricultural property, which was the

economic basis of their power and helped them manipulate voting and policies. On the other hand, land inequality was systemically lower in areas harder hit by the Black Death. In those areas, the pandemic had originally led to a severe loss of economic power by traditional elites, also manifesting itself in the redistribution of land assets.

Third, we saw differences in electoral disputes—disputes arising around some kind of voter fraud or intimidation. Where there was a high level of plague [death](#), electoral disputes were rarer, which, from a democratic perspective, is positive. In areas with lower Black Death mortality, electoral disputes were more likely. As indicated, this is likely related to strong landed elites that were antidemocratic in their political orientation and resorted to intimidation and fraud.

Importantly, we were also able to show that the introduction of participative elections at the town level can be observed in areas hard hit by the plague to some extent prior to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, which was another major catalyst for political and social change.

Q. What other variables did you consider?

Vogler: The most important variables we accounted for in our statistical analysis are those that could influence both the historical intensity of the Black Death and subsequent long-term political outcomes we studied. Two factors stood out: urban density, which naturally led to stronger outbreaks and affected socioeconomic development in the long run; and distance to trade venues, as areas close to rivers or other major ports experienced the plague more severely. We accounted for all of these variables in our analysis, as well as variations in timing—because some areas were hit earlier and others later, which affected the severity of local outbreaks.

Gingerich: Exposure to trade is one of the single most important variables historians and economists emphasize when studying the Black Death. We took a lot of time and care in this paper to find adequate measures of exposure to trade, and do everything in our power to control for its effects.

Q. In the U.S., we have seen some variation in the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic in different states or regions. Could we experience similar variation in political or socioeconomic outcomes as a consequence?

Gingerich: The long-term legacy of any pandemic depends on its impact on the labor market, and the labor market impact of COVID-19 has not yet been sufficiently large to fundamentally change the balance of power between labor and capital in the U.S., which is essentially what leads to these bigger political changes. COVID-19 has generated more than 100,000 deaths in the U.S., which is devastating, but when compared to other pandemics, is still a relatively low mortality rate. It is especially low compared with the Black Death, which killed between 30% to 60% of Europe's population.

However, we do not believe that COVID-19 is the end of the story, given how densely populated and connected our world is. If we were to eventually have a pandemic with a higher mortality rate, affecting people in prime working age, we could see the type of labor market reorganization that our paper highlights.

Vogler: An important difference between the Black Death and the current pandemic is that variation in the response to the Black Death was not systematic and for the most part ineffective. In this sense, variation in social or medical infrastructure at the time did not substantially alter

the pandemic's course. But in the present COVID-19 pandemic, significant and much more systematic regional variation in health infrastructure, local population densities and the authorities' responses could shape the pandemic's political and socioeconomic outcomes.

Q. Do you see any similarities?

Gingerich: I think both pandemics raised stark choices about the distribution of resources in society, as protecting vulnerable populations is, to some extent, a tradeoff with other consequences borne by those less immediately impacted.

One other outcome that remains in question is the long-term consequence for inequality. The Black Death was an extremely powerful vehicle for reducing economic inequality, as our results on landholding inequality show. It is very much an open question if COVID-19 will reduce economic inequality or magnify it, and if it will spur policy conversations around issues like public health care.

Vogler: There are also, certainly, political consequences on the line, and each political party's response could affect votes in the upcoming presidential election. Those effects will probably not be as long-lasting as what we saw in medieval Germany—with outcomes still visible after several centuries had passed—but they will certainly have a significant impact on our society now.

Also, the Black Death has been linked to developments in technology, and it is likely that COVID-19 will catalyze technological change, too, particularly considering the growth in the number of people working from home and the future of remote and flexible work.

Finally, similar to the Black Death, there will likely be a lasting cultural impact from COVID-19—in popular culture, the arts, and even simple

but widespread norms like handshakes.

More information: Jan Vogler et al. Pandemics and Political Development: The Electoral Legacy of the Black Death in Germany, (2020). [DOI: 10.33774/apsa-2020-2c2fm-v4](https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2020-2c2fm-v4)

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