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American Economic and Political Focus in the Age of Corona

Today, the United States undergoes one of the greatest threats it has ever faced in the history of the nation, a pandemic, the likes of which have not been seen for over a century. Even now, while the virus is still widespread and catastrophic, the US has seen an unprecedented rise in unemployment rate, a rapid fall of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and government stimulus packages that are unequal in spending amount to any others that have come before in order to save businesses, small and large, as well as ordinary people. Furthermore, the nation's political ideologies have become more divisive than ever before, as some people call for socialist reforms and big government to save the American economy and people from this disaster, while others believe capitalism, small government, and free markets shall harken a return to normalcy. This virus has come during a presidential election year, meaning the Democrats have seemingly consolidated behind their presumptive nominee Joe Biden, while the Republicans rally behind the presidential incumbent Donald Trump. These two politicians have become the figureheads of the two reigning political ideologies that inquire as to how we put the country back on track during and after this virus. Beyond national politics, state governments have differed in their approaches to combat Coronavirus, and this has had more impact on individual lives than most other things during the pandemic. The nation, and each citizen individually, has seen

unprecedented hardship in the past two months that has and will continue to drastically change the America of old and bring into reality the America of tomorrow.

First, taking a look at the economy, it is clear that America is facing a crisis, the totality of which is unknown. Over the past five weeks, the U.S. has seen more than 26 million jobs lost due to Coronavirus, according to the US. Labor Department, which would be an unemployment rate of approximately 18.3% (Shierholz & Rainey, 2020). While this number is rising, it is important to note that before states called for quarantine, February's U.S. unemployment rate was 3.5% ("Bureau of Labor...", 2020). In just a little over a month, this is the largest unemployment spike (over the smallest amount of time) in the history of the United States economy. Furthermore, this is putting more pressure on the federal government and its social welfare net, as only about 29% of unemployed Americans actually received unemployment benefits in March (Desilver, 2020). Surely, this number must rise to contend with the amount of newly unemployed Americans, otherwise the U.S. shall face a dire level of poverty within the nation as the pandemic continues.

Concerning Dow Jones and the stock market, the pandemic forced a sheer drop in the industrial average. According to Bloomberg data, the Dow saw a historic all-time high of 29,551 points on February 12, before Coronavirus had much of an impact on the U.S. economy (Merrill & Dey, 2020). By March 17 however, the Dow was at 21,237, reflecting a lack of confidence in the American market, with the largest single day drop being on March 16 with 2,999 points (Merrill & Dey, 2020). However, since the quarantine began in mid-March, and more information concerning the virus has been gleaned, the Dow Jones average has steadily risen back to 24,633 as of April 29 ("Dow Jones...", 2020). The stock market is always volatile, and it

may rise and change at the whims of everyday news, however, it is important to track the aggregate changes in the stock market to show the confidence of stockholders and investors in American business. While confidence in the market has been relatively consistent during the quarantine, the introduction of the Coronavirus into the U.S. demonstrates how problematic the virus has become for American business.

Speaking of American business and economy, the U.S. federal government passed the single largest stimulus package of all time during this pandemic. On March 22, President Donald Trump signed a \$2 trillion bill that, “intended to rescue the coronavirus-battered economy” (Fabian & Sink, 2020). The bill includes, “\$350 billion in aid for small businesses and offers \$1,200 direct payments to middle- and low-income American adults, plus \$500 for each child” (Fabian & Sink, 2020). While this package will help the American people and business owners, it shall hardly do enough to save American capitalism as it has been known in the 21st century. During the pandemic and resulting quarantine, only “essential businesses” have been allowed to stay open as they are, while other businesses, that are more recreational in nature, have been forced to shut their doors for over a month (Hutzler, 2020). According to Marketwatch, as of April 13, “Forty-three percent of small businesses say they will have to permanently close within six months without some sort of quick cash infusion or fast improvement in economic conditions” (Keshner, 2020). The American (and capitalist) dream of finding one’s passion and creating a business to indulge that freedom is being impeded upon by the government’s response to the virus, and although such decisions have indubitably slowed the spread of Coronavirus, the results to quarantine people and business is changing the American way of life and political arena.

There are two main political actors during this pandemic, the federal government, and a citizen's respective state government. According to the CDC, the federal government is attempting to prevent the spread of the virus from other nations into the U.S. and between the states, while each state enforces isolation and quarantine with their respective laws and policing powers ("Legal Authorities...", 2020). The nation is currently seeing over one million Coronavirus cases, and over fifty-seven thousand deaths ("Cases in U.S.", 2020). At the federal level, President Trump has released guidelines for opening up America again, as his top priority throughout the pandemic has been about reopening the American public and economy as soon as possible ("Opening up America Again", 2020). According to the New York Times, President Trump wanted to reopen the country as soon as Easter, April 12, but that could not happen, as that date was far too early in the quarantine, and medical capacity throughout the country could have been easily overwhelmed (Karni & McNeil, 2020). Then, according to the Washington Post, the president set a goal to reopen on May 1, but that date is quickly approaching and many states appear, at most, ready to do a soft reopening, where isolation is still encouraged, but some non-essential businesses are able to open, at least partially (Rucker, Costa & Parker, 2020). While President Trump and other Republicans are striving to reopen the government and recover the economy as soon as possible, some Democrats have other pursuits in mind. According to Real Clear Politics, Democratic House Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez claimed Americans should deny going back to "70 hour [work] weeks" just to hardly be able to make ends meet (Schwartz, 2020). Rep. Cortez has reform in mind, and rather than returning to a pre-Coronavirus workforce, she deems it time for change. All the while, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, Joe Biden, released his own plan for the virus, stating, "Biden

believes we must spend whatever it takes, without delay, to meet public health needs and deal with the mounting economic consequences” (“The Biden Plan...”, 2020). In this plan, Democrats emphasize big government spending to unencumber the American public. Now, since these are unprecedented times, there is no definitive correct answer to deal with the plethora of issues that are borne by Coronavirus. However, there are many political agendas at hand, with different goals in mind, and it is clear that people align with whichever ideology presents a better answer to them for whatever issue appears more threatening to their lives. This has and will continue to impact the nation’s politics and the presidential election quickly approaches. Currently, on April 29, according to Real Clear Politics, Biden, the presidential challenger, is polling at a 48.3 average while Trump, the incumbent, polls at a 42 average (“General Election...”, 2020). There are roughly seven months left until the 2020 presidential election, and the Coronavirus pandemic will surely be one of the largest deciding factors in that election.

Now, it is important to acknowledge how the states are also differing in their responses to Coronavirus, quarantine, and reopening. An urban and overall Democratic state, New York, has borne the brunt of this assault on public health, seeing nearly three-hundred thousand cases and twenty-two thousand deaths in that state alone (Sanchez, 2020). With more dire conditions in this state than in the rest of the United States, Governor Andrew Cuomo is asking businesses to have detailed reopening plans after the stay-at-home order lifts on May 15 (Sanchez, 2020). Georgia, a far more rural and Republican state, has a less strict policy in mind. Governor Brian Kemp expressed desires to reopen many of the state’s non-essential businesses as early as April 24 (LeBlanc, 2020). Other states, such as Colorado, which is a very mixed rural and urban state, and is Democratic-leaning while still being more politically-centric than many other states, finds

itself somewhere in between the plans of New York and Georgia. Colorado's Governor Jared Polis has implemented a multi-phase plan of reopening that spans from April 27th through May 4th, where certain non-essential businesses will begin to reopen; after that, more phases are surely to come as the early summer comes approaches until the entire state is open as per the status quo of pre-Coronavirus (Sanchez, 2020). However, for some this is not enough, for protests and counter-protests have broken out in Colorado and other states, as one side argues for the hasty reopening of the state due to civil liberties, and the other side argues for everyone to follow stay-at-home orders ("Coronavirus protests...", 2020). Perhaps, more than anything, these different responses depict how different people wish to live during the pandemic. Whereas an urban place such as New York City would wish to have strict stay-at-home orders to limit virus outbreak among many people, other places such as rural towns in Georgia would wish to have more relaxed orders to maximize personal freedoms and protection against the spread of Coronavirus. But, this may also be a reflection of the aforementioned agendas and pursuits of political ideologies, as Republicans may want to reopen to save businesses, while Democrats want to expand the powers of the state to further battle the virus and provide for social welfare.

Perhaps the difference of agendas is one of the greatest attributes of the current situation, as each level of government is forced between two choices at this point, both with their own deadly consequences. One route that each level of government may take is to be more lenient on quarantine laws, giving a saving throw to businesses in, what is for many, their most desperate hour. This would also aid against the problem of rising depression, mental health issues, and suicide rates, caused by the quarantine as predicted by many media outlets, "this crisis, and our response to it, will have psychological consequences" (Kanter & Manbeck, 2020). However, this

relief is measured against safety for the general welfare, for nearly everyone has been affected by this virus. The New York Times reports, “The growing number of coronavirus cases and deaths have touched family and social circles across New York City, making the invisible threat seem far more real” (Wilson, 2020). It seems nearly every individual in the nation is, either themselves directly affected by the virus in their community, or knows someone who is. To add anecdotal evidence to this point, a few weeks ago, my close friend was nearly exposed to the virus at her workplace, but she, thankfully, did not get the infection, which, with her pre-existing conditions, would have been ruinous for her and her family. Furthermore, I have received the terrible and sorrowful news today that I shall lose my great-mother to this virus sometime during the next few days, according to her doctors. It saddens me that she must go through this, and to know that other Americans face similar situations. In Larimer County (my home county), there are approximately three hundred and sixty cases alone (“Larimer County...”, 2020). My point in stating these things is to show how I, a random and rather usual U.S. citizen, know people who have been directly impacted by the virus, and live in a county that suffers because of it; thus, I am also directly impacted by the virus. If I am so impacted, I wonder how many other citizens face a similar impact.

The outbreak and spread of the virus has and will continue to affect every individual in the nation, even during the quarantine, where measures are supposed to be safe. So the other choice at hand, besides opening everything back up, is for the government to keep everything locked down, for the safety of individual welfare, but at the cost of the economy, people’s financial livelihoods, and the general mental health of the nation. This decision that our political leaders face is quite alike to the ethical “trolley” problem, where a person is forced to choose

which track a trolley will use and, by doing so, they choose who the trolley will hit (as there are terrible consequences either way) to save the greatest amount of lives and do the greatest amount of good possible in that situation (Thomson, 1976). If the government reopens the nation and businesses are saved, or if the government keeps the nation closed to save lives from the virus, there will be detrimental consequences in either choice. The question is, which choice would do the greatest amount of good? That is the inquiry today, and it is the crossroads of fate that our country dwells at, knowing it will have to make one choice or another. But it is clear that, no matter the decision, America will never be the same.

In conclusion, the pandemic caused by Coronavirus has most definitely changed America as this century has so far known it. Whether it is through economic downfall and change, or further division in political ideologies, it is clear that the United States has entered a new era in its history. Furthermore, it is not only the institution of the U.S. that faces great change and peril, but every individual in the nation faces such things. Historic wars, economic depressions, or other catastrophic events have seldom had this much of an impact on every single American. Perhaps it will only be when we look back on these historical events that we truly understand how much Coronavirus has impacted the legacy of the United States of America and its people.

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