

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## The Pandemic Exposes and Exacerbates Existing Problems of Inequality and Polarization

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### Five Divisive and Inequal Democracies Hit by the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on public health in most countries, but it has had especially severe effects on five major democracies: the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines. These states have five of the highest death tolls and caseloads from COVID-19 of any countries, and all have struggled to control the pandemic. Democracy itself is not the reason for their public health failures. Other democracies, such as Australia and Canada, have not only produced effective public health responses but also taken robust measures to mitigate the pandemic's effect on inequality.

Instead, the vast social and economic inequalities in these five ethnically and racially diverse countries have made the pandemic harder to control. These states have failed to handle the novel coronavirus in part because they have never addressed their historical internal divides, which COVID-19 has brutally revealed. In addition, leaders in these states who have attacked political systems and social cohesion have hindered the pandemic response.

Today, all five states are extremely economically unequal. The United States is the most economically unequal of the seven developed states in the Group of Seven and has the fourth worst income inequality in the world. Brazil is the most economically unequal country in Latin America, despite efforts by a succession of Brazilian governments to use cash transfers and other programs to combat inequality, and the Philippines also has high income inequality.<sup>1</sup> Indonesia and India both face sharply rising income inequality.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Schaeffer, "6 Facts About Economic Inequality in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, February 7, 2020, <http://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s>; Valentina, "Brazil is Latin America's Most Unequal Country in Terms of Income Distribution," *Brazil Reports*, January 21, 2019, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/inequality-and-social-unrest-latin-america-tocqueville-paradox-revisited>; Anakwa Dwamena, "How Jair Bolsonaro and the Coronavirus Put Brazil's Systemic Racism on Display," *New Yorker*, July 9, 2020, <http://newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-jair-bolsonaro-and-the-coronavirus-put-brazils-systemic-racism-on-display>.  
<sup>2</sup> Schaeffer, "6 Facts About Economic Inequality in the U.S."; Juzhong Zhuang, "The Recent Trend of Income Inequality in Asia and How Policy Should Respond," Group of 24 and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York, October 2018, [http://g24.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Rising\\_income\\_inequality\\_in\\_Asia.pdf](http://g24.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Rising_income_inequality_in_Asia.pdf); Tjoe, "Two Decades of Economic Growth Benefited Only the Richest 20%"; "Income Inequality in India Continues to Rise: Report," *Wire*, November 19, 2020, <http://thewire.in/economy/income-inequality-india-china-report>.

The deep economic and social inequality in the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines has undermined how these states have responded to the pandemic. Beyond revealing inequalities and devastating public health, the pandemic has made socioeconomic inequality worse, and also added to democratic backsliding. In these five states, caseloads and death tolls of the novel coronavirus are falling hardest on racial, ethnic, and sometimes religious minorities and on the poor; poor and minority communities significantly overlap, and many of these same citizens have the preexisting conditions that make them more susceptible to getting extremely sick or dying from COVID-19.

Furthermore, as often has happened during past major emergencies, political leaders have taken advantage of the emergency to corrode democratic norms and institutions—in these five democracies and across the globe.

### Populist Leaders Undermine Public Health Responses

Politicians often have only made inequality worse, which further hampered efforts to control the virus. Indeed, the five recent leaders' rhetoric and policies, combined with their states' histories of inequality, have ensured the pandemic hits minorities and the poor harder than middle-class, wealthy, and racial, religious, and ethnic majority citizens. In many ways, COVID-19 also has deepened inequality in these countries.

The Donald J. Trump administration, for instance, repeatedly sought to undermine the Affordable Care Act (ACA), which has helped expand access to health insurance, particularly among minorities and the poor. In the end, the Supreme Court rejected overturning the ACA. Overturning the ACA would have resulted in over twenty-one million, mostly lower-income Americans, losing health insurance.<sup>3</sup> The Trump administration also took a hard-line approach to policing and voting rights, refusing to countenance police reforms and trying to undermine voting rights in numerous ways. The effects of this voter suppression fell hardest on the poor and minorities.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, leaders in these large democracies also used public rhetoric to divide and polarize societies, often further harming minority groups. On Twitter, former President Trump routinely claimed that politicians of color such as Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams and New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez were unqualified for office and should be feared; he also routinely demonized immigrants and other minorities as dangers to the United States.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Reed Abelson and Abby Goodnough, "If the Supreme Court Ends Obamacare, Here's What It Would Mean," *New York Times*, February 10, 2021, <http://nytimes.com/article/supreme-court-obamacare-case.html>; Andrew Keshner, "Obamacare is Closing the Coverage Gap Between Rich and Poor, Black and White," *MarketWatch*, August 20, 2019, <http://marketwatch.com/story/obamacare-is-closing-the-coverage-divide-between-rich-and-poor-black-and-white-2019-08-19>.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Megerian and Noah Bierman, "Trump Ignores Calls for Police Reforms," *Los Angeles Times*, June 4, 2020, <http://latimes.com/politics/story/2020-06-04/trump-ignores-calls-for-police-reforms>; Joel Shannon, "USA Today Poll: Americans Want Major Police Reform, More Focus on Serious Crime," *USA Today*, June 29, 2020, <http://usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/06/29/us-police-reform-poll-finds-support-more-training-transparency/3259628001>; Perry Bacon Jr., "Five Ways Trump and GOP Officials Are Undermining the Election Process," *FiveThirtyEight*, August 11, 2020, <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/five-ways-trump-and-gop-officials-are-undermining-the-election-process>; Theodore R. Johnson, "The New Voter Suppression," Brennan Center for Justice, January 16, 2020, <http://brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/new-voter-suppression>.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Robinson, "Trump Stokes Resentment Toward Minorities. Republicans Just Smile." *Washington Post*, November 5, 2018, <http://washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-stokes-resentment-toward-minorities-republicans-just->

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has claimed that indigenous Brazilians are only now “evolving [into] humans” and complained that Brazilian cavalry had not wiped out more indigenous peoples during the conquest of the Brazilian interior.<sup>6</sup> Bolsonaro’s demonization of indigenous people and evisceration of protections for the Amazon Rainforest have contributed to a wave of illegal mining and foresting and a spike in violence against indigenous people in the Amazon basin.<sup>7</sup>

These policies exacerbated inequality and added to the pandemic. The Trump administration’s campaign against the ACA, for instance, combined with some Republican-led states’ refusal to expand Medicaid to allow their poorer citizens to access the ACA, kept the number of uninsured Americans high and hindered the pandemic response.<sup>8</sup>

Historical inequality is also hindering the vaccine rollout in many of these countries, even though vaccination campaigns are now the best weapon for ultimately controlling the pandemic. Many minority populations in the United States harbor deep distrust of government public health efforts, due to the lasting effects of systemic racism and a history of the U.S. government conducting illegal experiments on minorities (such as the Tuskegee study, which infected Black men with syphilis to study its effects when left untreated) and demonstrating disinterest in issues that damage minorities’ public health (such as the water crisis in Flint, Michigan). A study on views of vaccination conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found massive skepticism of the COVID-19 vaccine among Black Americans, with nearly 50 percent saying they will not get vaccinated “even if scientists deem it safe and it is available for free to anyone who wants it.”<sup>9</sup>

The populist leaders have also taken anti-science positions in general. Trump repeatedly mocked scientific consensus on effective measures to control the pandemic, adding chaos and confusion to the response effort and polarizing the public in ways that made it harder to develop anti-COVID-19 public health campaigns.<sup>10</sup> Bolsonaro, Jokowi, and Duterte also have denigrated scientific expertise throughout the pandemic, polarizing the response and undermining public health efforts.

smile/2018/11/05/10e059e0-e13b-11e8-8f5f-a55347f48762\_story.html; Eugene Scott, “Trump’s Most Insulting—and Violent—Language Is Often Reserved for Immigrants,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2019, <http://washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/02/trumps-most-insulting-violent-language-is-often-reserved-immigrants>.

<sup>6</sup> Fiona Watson, “Bolsonaro’s Election Is Catastrophic News for Brazil’s Indigenous Tribes,” *Guardian*, October 31, 2018, <http://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/31/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-indigenous-tribes-mining-logging>; “Brazil’s Indigenous to Sue Bolsonaro for Saying They’re ‘Evolving,’” Reuters, January 24, 2020, <http://reuters.com/article/us-brazil-indigenous/brazils-indigenous-to-sue-bolsonaro-for-saying-theyre-evolving-idUSKBN1ZN1TD>; Katy Watson, “The Racism Denier in Charge of Defending Black Rights in Brazil,” BBC, February 15, 2020, <http://bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-51501111>.

<sup>7</sup> Leticia Casado and Ernesto Londoño, “Under Brazil’s Far-Right Leader, Amazon Protections Slashed and Forests Fall,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2019, <http://nytimes.com/2019/07/28/world/americas/brazil-deforestation-amazon-bolsonaro.html>; Shanna Hanbury, “Murders of Indigenous Leaders in Brazilian Amazon Hits Highest Level in Two Decades,” *Mongabay*, December 14, 2019, <http://news.mongabay.com/2019/12/murders-of-indigenous-leaders-in-brazil-amazon-hit-highest-level-in-two-decades>.

<sup>8</sup> Frank J. Thompson, “Six Ways Trump Has Sabotaged the Affordable Care Act,” Brookings Institution, October 9, 2020, <http://brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/10/09/six-ways-trump-has-sabotaged-the-affordable-care-act>; Phil McCausland, “Residents Suffer as Mississippi and 13 Other States Debate Medicaid Expansion,” NBC News, November 4, 2019, <http://nbcnews.com/news/us-news/residents-suffer-mississippi-13-other-states-debate-medicaid-expansion-n1075661>; Dylan Scott, “Thousands Will Go Uninsured in the COVID-19 Outbreak Because Republicans Rejected Medicaid Expansion,” *Vox*, May 5, 2020, <http://vox.com/2020/5/5/21247204/coronavirus-unemployment-medicaid-eligibility-health-insurance>.

<sup>9</sup> “New Nationwide Poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Undefeated Reveals Distrust of the Health Care System Among Black Americans,” Kaiser Family Foundation, October 13, 2020, <http://kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/press-release/new-nationwide-poll-by-the-kaiser-family-foundation-and-the-undefeated-reveals-distrust-of-the-health-care-system-among-black-americans>.

<sup>10</sup> Zeke Miller and Jill Colvin, “Trump Attacks Dr. Anthony Fauci, Says ‘People Are Tired of Hearing’ Him and ‘All These Idiots’ on Coronavirus,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 2020, <http://chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-nw-trump-fauci-coronavirus-20201019-rofykxwrbcdxghjpa3r6tdjmu-story.html>; Toluse Olorunnipa, Ariana Eunjung Cha, and Laurie

These leaders often also have used the pandemic to boost their powers. For example, Modi has used the pandemic to further clamp down on the press, political opponents, and activists. Duterte has used the pandemic, and lockdowns, to clamp down on opponents as well. Meanwhile, the Trump administration stepped up its campaign against nominally independent inspector generals within government agencies during the pandemic and increasingly kept cabinet heads in their positions without congressional approval and against the law, among other efforts.<sup>11</sup> Although the new Joe Biden administration has promised to restore institutions and norms, whether it can fix much of the damage remains unclear.

These five large democracies are part of a global democratic regression. The 2021 version of *Freedom in the World*, the flagship publication of the monitoring organization Freedom House, was entitled “Democracy Under Siege” and noted that “democracy’s defenders sustained heavy new losses in their struggle against authoritarian foes, shifting the international balance in favor of tyranny. Incumbent leaders increasingly used force to crush opponents and settle scores, sometimes in the name of public health.”

## The Way Forward

Without a doubt, the five large democracies of the United States, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines are plagued by massive political, economic, and social problems. These challenges have been exacerbated by polarizing and often ineffective top leadership, both before and during the pandemic. The enormity and deep roots of these problems mean they cannot be solved rapidly or easily. Any list of ideas for progress can only be a jumping-off point. Some U.S. politics experts, for instance, believe political polarization, socioeconomic inequality, and the breakdown of social cohesion have become so bad that the country’s politics are unsalvageable and the United States has essentially become ungovernable.<sup>12</sup>

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McGinley, “Drug Promoted by Trump as Coronavirus ‘Game Changer’ Increasingly Linked to Deaths,” *Washington Post*, May 15, 2020, [http://washingtonpost.com/politics/drug-promoted-by-trump-as-coronavirus-game-changer-increasingly-linked-to-deaths/2020/05/15/85d024fe-96bd-11ea-9f5e-56d8239bf9ad\\_story.html](http://washingtonpost.com/politics/drug-promoted-by-trump-as-coronavirus-game-changer-increasingly-linked-to-deaths/2020/05/15/85d024fe-96bd-11ea-9f5e-56d8239bf9ad_story.html); Libby Cathey, “Timeline: Tracking Trump Alongside Scientific Developments on Hydroxychloroquine,” ABC News, August 8, 2020, <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/timeline-tracking-trump-alongside-scientific-developments-hydroxychloroquine/story?id=72170553>; Libby Cathey, “Trump, Downplaying Virus, Has Mocked Wearing Masks for Months,” ABC News, October 2, 2020, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-downplaying-virus-mocked-wearing-masks-months/story?id=73392694>; Robin Givhan, “Trump’s Refusal to Wear Face Masks Turned Them Into a Sad National Symbol,” *Washington Post*, October 3, 2020, <http://washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/10/03/trumps-refusal-wear-face-masks-turned-them-into-sad-national-symbol/>; Michael D. Shear and Sarah Mervosh, “Trump Encourages Protest Against Governors Who Have Imposed Virus Restrictions,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2020, <http://nytimes.com/2020/04/17/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-governors.html>.

<sup>11</sup> “Under a Lawless Trump, Our System of Checks and Balances Is Being Destroyed,” *Washington Post*, September 18, 2020, <http://washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/18/trump-law-checks-balances/?arc404=true>; Kimberly Wehle, “Congress Has Lost Its Power Over Trump,” *Atlantic*, February 4, 2020, <http://theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/checks-and-balances-trump-has-swept-away/606013/>; Glenn C. Altschuler, “President Trump’s Assault on Checks and Balances: Five Acts in Four Weeks,” *Hill*, February 24, 2020, <http://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/484299-president-trumps-assault-on-checks-and-balances-five-acts-in-four-weeks>; Melissa Quinn, “The Internal Watchdogs Trump Has Fired or Replaced,” CBS News, May 19, 2020, <http://cbsnews.com/news/trump-inspectors-general-internal-watchdogs-fired-list/>; Becca Damante, “At Least 15 Trump Officials Do Not Hold Their Positions Lawfully,” *Just Security*, September 17, 2020, <http://justsecurity.org/72456/at-least-15-trump-officials-do-not-hold-their-positions-lawfully/>; Kyle Cheney, “Trump Calls on GOP State Legislatures to Overturn Election Results,” *Politico*, November 21, 2020, <http://politico.com/news/2020/11/21/trump-state-legislatures-overturn-election-results-439031>.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, “Is America Ungovernable Now?,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2021,

Yet effective governance has both policy and political rewards, even for highly polarizing leaders as it bolsters leaders' popularity and potentially their election prospects. The severe effects of the crisis, meanwhile, offer an opportunity for leaders to go big in response and push major reforms to address their countries' deep economic and political challenges. Many of these reforms should create a policy agenda focused on what Zia Qureshi of the Brookings Institution calls "predistribution"—putting measures in place that address inequality and making growth more inclusive from the bottom up.<sup>13</sup>

Even in these five large and highly polarized democracies, polling suggests that a significant percentage of people want to overcome polarization in dealing with COVID-19—and possibly in combating broader issues of inequality as well. For example, despite the United States' seemingly bitter COVID-19-related partisanship, polling has shown that Americans generally want to work together to address the virus and that a significant majority of Americans share views about the best ways to address COVID-19.<sup>14</sup> More broadly, research by the organization More in Common suggests that, across multiple countries, "the pandemic has created a new sense of togetherness" and some common desire to work together to solve problems and rebuild public trust, which is essential to government functioning, in a pandemic or in normal times.<sup>15</sup>

During this difficult time, leaders should push for systemic, democratizing reforms of political and electoral systems, and punish actors who aggressively promote polarization. This could include promoting ranked-choice voting, public financing of campaigns, and the drawing of fair, representative districts for state and federal elections, among other measures. The Biden administration has embraced comprehensive governance reforms designed to bolster voting rights and curtail partisan gerrymandering, which tends to dilute the power of minority voters.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, as in the 2022 Philippine presidential election, voters will have the final say. ■

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<http://nytimes.com/2021/01/20/opinion/joe-biden-inauguration.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Zia Qureshi, "Tackling the Inequality Pandemic." Brookings Institution paper, 17 Nov 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/tackling-the-inequality-pandemic-is-there-a-cure/>

<sup>14</sup> Quarcoo and Kleinfeld, "Can the Coronavirus Heal Polarization?"; Jamie Ballard, "Two-Thirds of Americans Would Support Their State Instituting a One-Month COVID-19 Lockdown," *YouGov*, November 10, 2020, <http://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/11/10/americans-support-covid-19-lockdowns>.

<sup>15</sup> "The New Normal?," More in Common, September 2020, <http://moreincommon.com/newnormal>.

<sup>16</sup> "Biden Announces a First Priority for a Biden Administration Will Be Comprehensive Reforms, as Reflected in H.R. 1," Democracy 21, April 17, 2020, <http://democracy21.org/news-press/press-releases/biden-announces-a-first-priority-for-a-biden-administration-will-be-comprehensive-reforms-as-reflected-in-h-r-1>; Kim Soffen, "How Racial Gerrymandering Deprives Black People of Political Power," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2016, <http://washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/06/09/how-a-widespread-practice-to-politically-empower-african-americans-might-actually-harm-them/>; Olga Pierce and Kate Rabinowitz, "'Partisan' Gerrymandering Is Still About Race," *ProPublica*, October 9, 2017, <http://propublica.org/article/partisan-gerrymandering-is-still-about-race>.

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