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10 THESES ON DEMOCRACY AND COVID-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 has revealed a variety of challenges to nation states around the world. This essay seeks to see what were the actual differences between democracies and authoritative regimes in responding to the diverse challenges. Matters of transparency and accountability are certainly more in evidence in democracy, but some believe that in health crises authoritative regimes are more efficient. Proposing ten theses this essay sifts through the data we can now claim as instructive measuring whether civil liberties are in fact conducive to public health. Democracies do noticeably well. Still, as vaccination distribution studies emerge, on the question of the most marginalized within nations and across the globe, we find neither governance structure predictably responsive. Rarely are the poor well served in health crises.

Keywords: Authoritative Regimes; COVID-19; Democracy Pandemic; Herd-immunity; Lockdowns; Popularists; Vaccinations

Introduction¹

COVID-19 has revealed a variety of challenges to nation states around the world. This essay reports the actual differences between

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¹Special thanks to Mr Aidan O'Neill, for his great work in the research of this article.

democracies and authoritative regimes in responding to the diverse challenges of the present pandemic. Matters of transparency and accountability are certainly more in evidence in democracy, but some believe that in health crises authoritative regimes are more efficient. Proposing ten theses this essay sifts through the data we can now claim as instructive measuring whether civil liberties are in fact conducive to public health. Democracies do noticeably well. Still, as vaccination distribution studies emerge, on the question of the most marginalized within nations and across the globe, we will see that neither governance structure is predictably responsive. Rarely are the poor well served in health crises.

1. "Transparent governments report and contain epidemics most effectively"²

This quote from *The Economist* rightly begins this essay. In the early days of the pandemic, authoritative regimes looked more attractive because they could inhibit the commerce of people and thereby inhibit the transmission of the virus. Those early assumptions were premature and insufficient and could not stand as adequate standards. Rather, as the insight from *The Economist* succinctly puts it, transparency is what science and governments need to establish as the fundamental standard by which we can understand and respond to pandemics like COVID-19.

Transparency stands as a contradiction to the common belief that autocracies are better than democracies at handling the virus. In the early days of the pandemic, looking at China's radical steps as opposed to the European and US responses, centralized non-democratic/authoritarian regimes *seemed* more successful. Wanting to see successful strategies quickly develop as responses at the outset, we looked at the authoritarian regimes as having the power and authority that could best control people so as to inhibit the spread of the virus.

The *Economist* was not convinced:

People who praise China for its handling of COVID-19 would do better to look at Taiwan, a neighbouring democracy. China wasted valuable time

²"Out in the Open; Covid-19 and Democracy," *The Economist*, (6 June 2020), https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=mmlin_m_bostcoll&id=GALE|A625734606&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=b3606b59; See other similar essays: "Diseases Like Covid-19 are Deadlier in Non-democracies," *The Economist*, (18 February 2020), <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/02/18/diseases-like-covid-19-are-deadlier-in-non-democracies>; "Democracies Contain Epidemics most Effectively," *The Economist*, (6 June 2020), <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/06/06/democracies-contain-epidemics-most-effectively>.

in December by intimidating doctors who warned of a lethal virus. Taiwan swiftly launched tracing measures in January—and has suffered only seven deaths.³

The *Economist* argues that they have “analysed epidemics from 1960 to 2019. Though these outbreaks varied in contagiousness and lethality, a clear correlation emerged. Among countries with similar wealth, the lowest death rates tend to be in places where most people can vote in free and fair elections.”⁴

Additionally they note that the transparency of a free press can assist significantly in instilling confidence and cooperation. Suppression of the press can also interrupt the needed flow of information.

Significantly, it is worth considering that for most human beings, when we see something as destabilizing as a pandemic coming our way, we think we need to regain control of the situation so that we can respond to its challenges. But with something as unprecedented as this pandemic, we need control *as well as* understanding so as to respond. Autocratic regimes’ singular emphasis on control suppresses the flow and thereby access of knowledge and becomes deeply problematic when the need for research emerges. Control without transparency and accountability compromise true scientific investigation.

A case in point, suggested by *The Economist*, was the physician from Wuhan, Li Wenliang, who tried repeatedly to alert authorities and the world that the outbreak in Wuhan needed to be faced and addressed. The silencing of Li Wenliang led not only to his tragic death but also to many others’ illness and deaths and lost us valuable time when the world needed to respond more quickly and correctly.⁵

2. “Democracies are better at responding to catastrophes than authoritarianisms”

German Petersen reminds us with these words a key insight from no less than Amartya Sen in his study of famines that democracies are key to catastrophic response.⁶

³“Out in the Open; Covid-19 and Democracy.”

⁴“Out in the Open; Covid-19 and Democracy.”

⁵“‘Hero who Told the Truth’: Chinese Rage over Coronavirus Death of Whistleblower Doctor,” *The Guardian* February 7, 2020; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/07/coronavirus-chinese-rage-death-whistleblower-doctor-li-wenliang>

⁶German Petersen. “Democracy, Authoritarianism, and COVID-19 Pandemic Management: The Case of SARS-CoV-2 Testing,” *American Political Science Association*, 16 July 2020, <https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2020-wbhfk-v4>

It is instructive that Sen became a strong advocate for democracy in the face of major public health matters, because initially he showed little interest in the connection between famine and democracy. Michael Massing notes that in Sen's study of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, in which as many as three million people died, it was widely blamed on food shortages. Sen found that food production in Bengal had not declined but rather food prices rose while workers' wages did not, making food inaccessible.⁷ Sen realized that at that point in history the data was not yet known *nor released* in British controlled India. He did not yet consider the impact that a democratic free press would have made.

After his work on *Poverty and Famine*,⁸ Sen began investigating the Chinese famine of 1958 to 1961, a famine whose true toll of death in the "tens of millions" would not be known until Mao Zedong died in 1976. Sen thought, what if a famine broke in democratic India at the same time? Could a democratic government with a free press hide such a catastrophic failure? Massing notes that for that famine, "the reason seemed clear: the absence of a free press and opposition parties meant there was no one to sound the alarm."⁹ Liberties, a free press, and opposition parties were key elements for adequately addressing health emergencies.

Significantly, Massing notes that Sen has frequently referred to democratic India's failures in combating everyday hunger. Sen does not simply mean that democracies will do better; rather, because of their social structures that emphasize transparency and accountability, they have greater capacity to respond. The failure of a democracy to address such health challenges needs, as Sen learned, to be broadly recognized. For instance, Sen, along with another economist, Jean Drèze, noted that nearly four million people die prematurely in India every year from malnutrition and related problems, what Massing notes is "more than the number who perished during the entire Bengal famine."¹⁰ But Sen insists that democracy is structurally better able than autocratic regimes to answer such challenges.

⁷Michael Massing, "Does Democracy Avert Famine," *The New York Times*, (March 1, 2003) <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/01/arts/does-democracy-avert-famine.html>

⁸Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

⁹Massing, "Does Democracy Avert Famine."

¹⁰Massing, see Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989; Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Massing does not let Sen walk away with that assertion. He quotes Frances Stewart, a professor of development economics at Oxford University: "Democracies are often run by ethnically based groups prepared to do terrible things to other ethnic groups... or they can be very corrupt, dominated by elites." She added: "Capitalist, democratic states put the emphasis on the private sector, which doesn't always deliver on social goods. The free press is good on major disasters like classic famines, but it tolerates chronic hunger as much as anyone else." Massing adds that the poor need institutions like trade unions and political parties that speak for them.¹¹ Herein, the Catholic "option for the poor" has an evident role to play in any democracy as well. The majority in democracies do not often address matters of inequity that minorities face. One can think, for instance, of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States to see how democracies so often overlook the racial, tribal, or caste injustices that democracies not only permit and overlook but actually provoke and promote.¹²

Massing concludes that while democracy is preferable, it is no cure-all. He notes, however, that in his more recent writings Sen "has paid more attention to the shortcomings of democracy and how they can be addressed. The key, he said, is not to jettison democracy but to find ways of making it work better for society's underdogs."¹³

3. Data shows us it is still too early to know whether in fact COVID-19 will, like most epidemics, fare better in democracies

The question of whether democracies might be better than autocracies arise, as Rachel Kleinfeld at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes, because the success of authoritarian regimes might make them and not democracies more attractive in the future.¹⁴ The stakes are much higher for democracies.

Indeed at the beginning of the pandemic, many studies were launched and there were multiple claims that democracies were better. For instance, from Oxford a fairly significant study of 111 countries' measures on actual mobility, the authors noted that despite

¹¹Massing, "Does Democracy Avert Famine."

¹²James F. Keenan, "The Color Line, Race and Caste: Structures of Domination and the Ethics of Recognition," *Theological Studies*, 82, 1 (2021) 69-94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563921992550>

¹³Massing, "Does Democracy Avert Famine."

¹⁴Rachel Kleinfeld, "Do Authoritarian or Democratic Countries Handle Pandemics Better?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/do-authoritarian-or-democratic-countries-handle-pandemics-better-pub-81404>

autocracies introducing more stringent lockdowns and using more privacy-intrusive contact tracing, the authors argued that they “find no evidence that autocratic governments were more effective in reducing travel, and evidence to the contrary: countries with democratically accountable governments introduced less stringent lockdowns but were approximately 20% more effective in reducing geographic mobility at the same level of policy stringency.”¹⁵ In a similar way, Ariana Berengaut noted that despite China’s early success, democracies are better at fighting outbreaks because public health programs depend on public trust.¹⁶ These claims or predictions were not comprehensive. Consider, for instance, more recent investigations.

As Dhruva Jaishankar notes in his study precisely on this topic, the data is hardly conclusive.¹⁷ David Stasavage argues also that there is no difference between the two forms of government, each have their own strengths. He writes: “In autocracies centralization of power allows for decisive action, but their ability to maintain secrecy means that they can also suppress information and ignore a problem. In a democracy greater transparency makes it hard to cover up a threat, but the decentralization of power that is inherent to a democracy can lead to a slow and potentially ineffective response.”¹⁸

Moreover, in their recent study on the topic, Guilhem Cassan and Milan Van Steenvoort basically hold a position similar to Stasavage and argue that “COVID 19 death rates do not exhibit any difference across political regimes.” They do note, however, “characteristics related to the vulnerability of the population to the

¹⁵ Carl Benedikt Frey, Chinchih Chen, and Giorgio Presidente, “Democracy, Culture and Contagion: Political Regimes and Countries Responsiveness to Covid-19,” (May 13 2020) <https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/publications/democracy-culture-and-contagion-political-regimes-and-countries-responsiveness-to-covid-19/>

¹⁶ Ariana Berengaut, “Democracies Are Better at Fighting Outbreaks,” *The Atlantic* (February 24, 2020) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/why-democracies-are-better-fighting-outbreaks/606976/>

¹⁷ Dhruva Jaishankar. “What does COVID19 tell us about democracy vs authoritarianism?” *Observer Research Gate*, (May 16 2020) <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/what-does-covid19-tell-us-about-democracy-vs-authoritarianism-66228/>.

¹⁸ David Stasavage, “Democracy, Autocracy, and Emergency Threats: Lessons for COVID-19 From the Last Thousand Years,” *International Organization*, 74. 1, (August 19, 2020) E1-E17. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/democracy-autocracy-and-emergency-threats-lessons-for-covid19-from-the-last-thousand-years/C4A106463606BE4C0310E56A3A15F5B7>

disease and geographical controls appeared to be of significant importance.”¹⁹

One could suggest, then, that the transparency and accountability structures of democracies at least may allow us to discern that and how the vulnerable in any location will be better served. Again, for this reason, the option for the poor seems to me an integral approach because as we continue to see, whether autocratic or democratic each political structure will overlook the more vulnerable in their society. To the *Economist's* insistence on transparency, I suggest we add the option for the poor as a principle that provokes the suspicion that our democracies *will in fact overlook* the marginalized even in the face of a global pandemic.

Moreover, with an eye to efficiency, another writer also acknowledges that neither political model is *in se* more effective but instead that the capacity for governance best predicts the performance countries have against the coronavirus.²⁰ Good intentions without adequate planning is not a sufficient public health approach to the pandemic.

Finally, another writer, noting the comparison between the European approaches versus the Chinese policies, asks whether the question about which system is better is really riddled with bias against the East.²¹ That question is one too that raises a healthy suspicion to check bias. But we will see that the questions of transparency and accountability will not only raise objections to what authoritarianism in China does but also to the way that democracies that have elected “strong men” autocrats, like Bolsonaro, Orban, and Trump, in Brazil, Hungary and the United States, respectively. The issues of transparency and accountability stand against not only long term autocracies but also against populist demagogues who assert their own autocratic authority within a democracy. And today there are many who fit the latter description.

¹⁹Guilhem Cassan and Milan Van Steenvoort, “Political regime and COVID 19 Death Rate: Efficient, Biasing or Simply Different Autocracies?” (January 26, 2021) <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2101.09960.pdf>

²⁰Maylin Meisenheimer, “Democracy? Autocracy? Coronavirus Doesn’t Care: Capacity for Governance best Predicts the Performance Countries have against the Coronavirus,” *The Diplomat* (March 17, 2020) <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/democracy-autocracy-coronavirus-doesnt-care/>

²¹Eugénie Mériéau, “COVID-19, Authoritarianism vs. Democracy: What the Epidemic Reveals about the Orientalism of Our Categories of Thought,” *SciencesPo* (August 28, 2020) <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/en/content/covid-19-authoritarianism-vs-democracy-what-epidemic-reveals-about-orientalism-our-categorie>

4. Whether a democracy or an authoritarian regime, still herd-immunity is not a good approach

From *Forbes Magazine*²² to the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*²³ everyone has called the Swedish approach a failure. In fact, in the case of Sweden, it seems that there are questions about how they even use the data they present.²⁴ Moreover, there is the question of accountability for such a failed strategy. Should those in Sweden who proposed the strategy be held accountable?²⁵

5. Democracies can already learn ways to be more effective

David Stasavage already noted that democracies can search for more effective and collaborative strategies.²⁶ For instance, in a very democratic context, the noted bioethicist Andrea Vicini has examined the pandemic comprehensively by looking at political dynamics, hard ethical choices, religious engagements, the significance of language, and the impact of policies on ordinary lives. He also ponders what should follow after controlling the infection and suggests that learning from the past and the present, we should look forward with “targeted engagements aimed at promoting health, a critical rethinking of human progress, a renewed solidarity accompanied by social reforms, and a sustainable future.”²⁷ His agenda, forged in the openness of contemporary democracies in the

²²Misha Gajewski, “Stop Trying To Make ‘Herd Immunity’ Happen: Sweden’s Attempt At Covid-19 Herd Immunity Failed,” *Forbes* (11 August 2020) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mishagajewski/2020/08/11/stop-trying-to-make-herd-immunity-happen-swedens-attempt-at-covid-19-herd-immunity-failed/#743461c541cb>

²³Eric Orlovski and David Goldsmith, “Four months into the COVID-19 pandemic, Sweden’s prized herd immunity is nowhere in sight,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (11 August 2020) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/metrics/10.1177/0141076820945282>

²⁴Jouni Korhonen and Birk Granberg, “Sweden Back casting, Now? Strategic Planning for Covid-19 Mitigation in a Liberal Democracy,” *Sustainability*, 12, 10, 4138, 19 May 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12104138>.

²⁵Frida Ghitis, “Will There be a Reckoning Over Sweden’s Disastrous ‘Herd Immunity’ Strategy?,” *World Politics Review* (December 17, 2020) <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29296/in-sweden-herd-immunity-has-failed-tragically-will-there-be-a-reckoning>

²⁶David Stasavage, “Democracy, Autocracy, and Emergency Threats: Lessons for COVID-19 From the Last Thousand Years,” *Cambridge University Press*, COVID-19 Online Supplemental Issue, 19 August 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000338>

²⁷Andrea Vicini, “COVID-19: A Crisis and a Tragedy – What’s Next,” *Theological Studies* 82. 1, (March 2021) 116-137 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0040563921995850>

light of critical and transparent dialogue, suggests how we can be more effective now and later.

Again, in more democratic contexts the questions about and practices of self-critique are significant steps for developing right responses to an unfolding pandemic like COVID-19.

6. Allowing for rule by decree, studies of democratic lockdowns in the past year now show very good news for democracies

Studies show that “citizens have understood that strict social containment was necessary, and have rewarded governments that decide to enforce it, at least in the short term.” Moreover, studies show that it has had a “positive spillover effect on support for democracy and its institutions. Perhaps, this is due to the realisation that governments were ready to make hard decisions which have prioritised the health of vulnerable individuals over economic interests.”²⁸

Indeed, the very guarantees of transparency and accountability, which are the strategic and sustainable values within democracies, have specifically allowed the comparative collection and candid assessment of numerous national interventions. Moreover, the lockdowns were specifically developed to protect the vulnerable even at the cost of economic impact. For this reason, the campaign of lockdowns actually needed to make the case that the preference for the vulnerable was integral for combatting COVID-19. For instance, one comprehensive study examines which interventions are more effective and why; the gathering of such urgent data can only be through mechanisms of accountable and transparent reporting.²⁹ We can add that consciousness-raising about the more marginalized also needs to be integrated into the calls for action that include lockdowns.

In fact, such studies became themselves instruments of persuasion that allowed democracies to have the data that reveal indeed that the lockdowns effectively and dramatically reduced the rates of transmission and impact.³⁰ Again these studies could not have the

²⁸Damien Bol, Marco Giani, André Blais, and Peter John Loewen, “The Effect of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Political Support: Some Good News for Democracy?” *European Journal of Political Research*, 19 May 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12401>

²⁹Nils Haug, Lukas Geyrhofer, Alessandro Londei, A. et al., “Ranking the Effectiveness of Worldwide COVID-19 Government Interventions,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 4 (2020) 1303–1312 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-01009-0>

³⁰Bruno Mégarbane, et al., “Is Lockdown Effective in Limiting SARS-CoV-2 Epidemic Progression? A Cross-Country Comparative Evaluation Using

needed force were they simply edited by authoritarian decision-making. The transparent accountability of the research itself coupled with the actual news of their findings show how democracies can get through COVID-19.

7. These lockdowns have become a fault line between democracies and autocracies

How lockdowns occurred, why they were imposed, and what arguments were presented are significant questions that help us to see the difference between the two government strategies. Autocracies, not subject to free press or other governmentally-guaranteed instruments of accountability, have in some instances, instrumentalized the virus for their own effect. For instance, one author writes in an article entitled “COVID-19 Emergency Measures Are Hurting Democracy Globally,”³¹ that indeed “responsible governments must be more interventionist in the face of a pandemic,” but still that “political leaders worldwide are increasingly turning to excessive and disproportionate emergency containment measures that spell grave dangers for civil rights and liberties.” That is, there is a problem when lockdowns are used to control people rather than the pandemic. Thus, the author notes that the World Health Organization has not raised any questions about China’s lockdowns.³²

In another major article for the United States Congress, we find a variety of concerns about autocratic regimes expanding their reach through lockdowns and surveillance, such that the aim is not the control of the virus but the control of their authority. They provide case studies of Hungary, Nigeria, Cambodia, and Kazakhstan and look at the manipulation of elections, the arrest of protesters and other so-called “health measures” that are merely opportunistic.³³

Epidemiokinetic Tools,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 36 3 (2021) 746-752. doi:10.1007/s11606-020-06345-5

³¹Stephen Thomson, “COVID-19 Emergency Measures Are Hurting Democracy Globally,” *American Journal of Public Health* 110, 9 (Sep 2020) 1356-1357, https://search.proquest.com/docview/2435556983?accountid=9673&rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprim0

³²Thomson writes: “The World Health Organization has repeatedly praised China’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the lack of clear evidence supporting the efficacy, sustainability, and proportionality of Wuhan-style lockdowns, which imposed an unprecedented, indefinite, mass quarantine of millions of people between January and April 2020.”

³³Michael A. Weber, Maria A. Blackwood, Tomas F. Husted, Thomas Lim, and Derek Mix, “Global Democracy and Human Rights Impacts of COVID-19: In Brief,”

8. Some populist leaders in democracies have instrumentalized the virus as well

Lacking competency to govern in the face of the virus and to make hard decisions that could make them vulnerable to their own power base, contemporary populists have attempted to manipulate the virus also to their own end. But the virus cannot be manipulated.

Noteworthy is Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil who remains popular in Brazil with the second highest death rate of 540,000.³⁴ More remarkable was my own president Donald Trump, whose own incompetence is now historical. In a study comparing the U.S. failure to South Korea's success, a study of two democracies, the authors note that "Ironically, in early 2016, the World Health Organization noted that the United States was in the best position of any country to address a future pandemic."³⁵ I consider his failure a Colossal one: we were by far the best prepared nation, with the strongest resources but became the pandemic's epicentre and lost the most number of citizens, 624,000 deaths.³⁶

His leadership was scandalous. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, for the first time in its history of 208 years, published an editorial on the eve of the presidential election.³⁷ Entitled, "Dying in a Leadership Vacuum," the thirty-four editors note that our leaders "have taken a crisis and turned it into a tragedy." Noting that "our leaders have largely claimed immunity for their actions," they add "this election gives us the power to render judgment." They conclude: "When it comes to the response to the largest public health crisis of our time, our current political leaders have demonstrated

Congressional Research Service, (26 June 2020) 1-15, 8. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46430.pdf>

³⁴ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/brazil/>; When I gave this paper in October 2020, Brazil was at 130,000 deaths. Throughout it has maintained the second highest rate of death, see Vinod Sreeharsha, "Covid-19 Batters Brazil, but Its Leader Is More Popular Than Ever," *Wall Street Journal*, (13 Sep 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-batters-brazil-but-its-leader-is-more-popular-than-ever-11599998401>

³⁵ Joshua J. Solano, Dennis G. Maki, Terry A. Adirim, Richard D. Shih, and Charles H. Hennekens, "Public Health Strategies Contain and Mitigate COVID-19: A Tale of Two Democracies," *American Journal of Medicine*, (15 Aug 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2020.08.001>.

³⁶ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/countries-where-coronavirus-has-spread/>

³⁷ Katie Shepherd, "The New England Journal of Medicine avoided politics for 208 years: Now it's urging voters to oust Trump," *Washington Post*, 8 Oct 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/10/08/science-journal-endorsement-trump/>.

that they are dangerously incompetent. We should not abet them and enable the deaths of thousands more Americans by allowing them to keep their jobs.”³⁸

In fact, on January 24, 2021, four days after Joseph Biden became President, Reuters reported the astonishing news that the Trump White House had developed no national plans to roll out the vaccinations.³⁹

Note, no democracy is a guarantor of transparency and accountability if its leader does not believe that he/she as President has a constitutive responsibility to be subject to such values.

9. Autocratic Populist leaders got into office by democratic elections and around the world, they have been remarkable failures in the face of COVID-19; the people of these democracies are responsible for their leaders’ failures as well

One clear indication of failure in the US concerns masks; not only has our former president refused to wear them; his backers did and do so as well.⁴⁰ Clearly no nod to the common good. Can we have democracy without regard for the common good? Few popularists or their supporters show any interest in it. In fact, in their attempts to sabotage the elections, as we saw in the attack on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, they show little abiding interest in democracy anyway.

10. Much has not been indicated about whether democracies are good at securing vaccinations. And that forthcoming indication seems to depend on three challenges about whether democracies can reach out: to those citizens on the margins who have less access to the vaccine; to those who refuse to recognize the significance of vaccines not only for themselves, but also for the common good; and, most importantly, to the global community filled with its structural inequities, and in particular to other nation states unable to access the vaccines for their own people.

The question of accessing the vaccines is now the critical question regarding whether democracies are good for public health. The

³⁸The Editorial Board of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, “Dying in a Leadership Vacuum.” *N Engl J Med* 383 (8 Oct 2020) 1479-1480, <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe2029812>

³⁹“Trump Administration Had No Coronavirus Vaccine Distribution Plan,” *Reuters* (January 24, 2021) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-klain/trump-administration-had-no-coronavirus-vaccine-distribution-plan-white-house-idUSKBN29T0FY>

⁴⁰See Solano above.

answer to whether the world's wealthier democracies are actually helping other nations get access to vaccinations is, however, disturbing. As Thomas J. Bollyky, the Director of the Global Health Program at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of *Plagues and the Paradox of Progress: Why the World Is Getting Healthier in Worrisome Ways* notes:

In a fight against a disease that crosses borders and has killed millions of people globally, the powerful countries with the best access to vaccines have kept an overwhelming number of available doses for themselves. Wealthy democracies have generously given money to the multinational COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access program, or COVAX, but they have been far less eager to part with doses that could quickly go into their own citizens' arms.⁴¹

We need, therefore, to recognize that besides transparency and accountability and besides making the option for the poor, democracies must embrace an education for the global common good. Only by appreciating the global common good, can we address the challenges now emerging regarding getting the whole global community vaccinated.⁴²

There is hope that we might be able to educate the electorate and the politicians on how democracy can promote the common good in public health, as some have argued.⁴³ But the reception of this news is still, like much here considered, not yet known.⁴⁴

Let us close with Bollyky's own important words, that in the question of COVID-19 and the different approaches of democracies and autocracies, the question is not simply about how they treat their own citizens, but rather, how they treat those at risk throughout the world. Indeed he sees that in the long run, promoting the global common good is in the critical interests of any democracy:

⁴¹Thomas J. Bollyky, "Democracies Keep Vaccines for Themselves," *The Atlantic* (March 27, 2021) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/rich-countries-give-money-keep-vaccines-themselves/618437/>

⁴²OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), "Enhancing Public Trust in COVID-19 Vaccination: The Role of Governments," *OECD* (10 May 2021) <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/enhancing-public-trust-in-covid-19-vaccination-the-role-of-governments-eae0ec5a/>

⁴³So argues John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Wake Up Call: Why the Pandemic has Exposed the Weakness of the West – and how to Fix it*, New York: Harper Collins, 2020.

⁴⁴Charles Powell, "Sleeping Sickness: Will Covid-19 Transform Democracies in the Long Term?," *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5870, 2020, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A637633206/AONE?u=mclin_m_bostcoll&sid=AONE&xid=cf2c701d.

That national leaders would prioritize vaccinating their own citizens is understandable. But the extreme inequity in vaccine access is hindering global efforts to combat the pandemic. It is also shortsighted as a diplomatic matter. Future doses from COVAX and Western donors are cold comfort to nations desperate for vaccines now. Those countries will remember who came to their assistance, and when. Failing to immediately respond to those needs, when other powers are aggressively marketing their donations, furthers the global perception that many of the democracies that handled the coronavirus crisis poorly at home are now also handling the crisis poorly abroad. Where China and Russia—authoritarian regimes whose leaders don't need to explain to voters why they are promising doses to other states' citizens—send vaccine donations today, increased influence may follow tomorrow.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Bollyky, "Democracies Keep Vaccines for Themselves."