

## CALL FOR ARTICLES

*RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*

**Issue on:**

### **THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN THE UNITED STATES**

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**Note this will be the first of three covid-19 related calls. The second call in spring 2021 will focus on socio-economic impacts and will be edited by Steven Raphael (University of California, Berkeley) and Daniel Schneider (John F. Kennedy School). The third call in fall 2021 will focus on educational impacts and will be edited by Dominique Baker (Southern Methodist University), Michal Kurlaender (University of California, Davis), Susanna Loeb (Brown University), and Ruth N. López Turley.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is quickly leading to broad changes in society and upending ways of life across the globe. It is important to begin to understand the social and political factors that shape the response to the pandemic, as well as how the pandemic alters subsequent political and social dynamics for individuals, groups, communities, and institutions. While the COVID-19 pandemic is a clear public health challenge, it also has social, political, and economic problems of interest to social scientists. We recognize that we are at the beginning of a full and deep understanding of the relationships between COVID-19 and U.S. society, but it is evidence that immediate issues are emerging. For example, public adoption of advised health behaviors relies on a successful interplay of public policy, personal and mass communication, and public attitudes toward government and fellow citizens. For a pandemic response to be effective, policy makers must devise strategies, information must be conveyed to the public, and individual attitudes and behaviors must change. The rise of diseases such as SARS, MERS, H1N1, and COVID-19 underlines the need to understand these phenomena—not just epidemiologically, but as socially and politically important events. Social and political factors impact government and individual responses to the pandemic, and the pandemic also alters the political and social fabric of the

country. That means issues of power, status, resources, culture, politics, and social structures play center stage as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, unfolded and continues.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the role that institutions, communities, and the public play in the implementation of policy and the need for an engaged and responsive citizenry. Differential compliance with stay-at-home orders, social distancing and other policy guidelines, combined with power and resource imbalances, emphasize how social and political cleavages shape the effectiveness of policies combatting the pandemic. Effective societal response relies on nimble political and social structures that can absorb information, and create, enact, and administer responsive policy. These concerns matter within institutions at the local, state, and national level. Effective responses also rely on the public to acquire and assess information, and to be engaged in their communities and the political environment—in other words, to be “good citizens” of an informed society. Yet, we expect that the existing social, political and cultural chasms; as well as inequalities in information and resources, are shaping how people and their government respond to the pandemic. We recognize that a variety of social resources and structures, including institutions, education, power, status, geography, beliefs, economic inequality, networks, and cultural capital, play a role in pandemic response.

The magnitude of the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the governmental responses that follow, have sweeping political and social consequences, which we are just beginning to study. Additionally, citizens’ experiences with the pandemic may shape subsequent behaviors, such as strategies for collecting and processing of information, trust in government, voting behavior, and civic engagement. Likewise, the pandemic and related governmental responses have important consequences on existing social and political inequalities, including race, class, and region of residence.

In this issue, we invite theoretical and empirical papers which enhance our initial understanding of the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak. Our aim is to highlight outstanding early research on: (1) how social and political dynamics shape responses to the pandemic; and (2) how the pandemic itself alters social and political dynamics for individuals, communities and institutions. This includes research exemplifying the interplay among politics and policy; information exchange; economics; psychology; social structures, including networks and institutions; power and status; and public behavior in the United States. We welcome research from across the social sciences, including communications, economics, education, organizational behavior, political science, psychology, and sociology. Papers may employ a variety of methods and data, including both quantitative and qualitative. We are particularly interested in studies that deepen our understanding of social institutions in times of crisis and change. In the United States, the decentralized nature of the pandemic response created cleavages between regions, urban and rural areas, demographic populations, and other groups leading to significant power and status

differentials. Papers that analyze geographic, racial, socioeconomic, political, or other status and power inequalities are welcome, as are papers that leverage key events, geographic variation, or temporal differences. Papers with an international focus will be considered only if they have clear comparison with, or direct implications for, the United States. Below are a list of possible questions and issues, organized into broad themes, that such papers might address. This list is suggestive only and is not meant to limit the topics papers might cover.

### *Valuing of Information and Expertise*

The mediating role of technology and social platforms, the creep of entertainment into news, and an overload of information in modern democracies change the way citizens value information and expertise. There is also an increasing variety of intermediaries through which policy information is communicated. Crucial examples include social influencers, media companies that may or may not look like traditional journalism organizations, political commentators, political parties, and direct communication from elected officials. These transformations reveal inequality among Americans in civic skills and behaviors related to news and information consumption. For instance, there is a widening gulf within the American public in a number of areas: the ability to distinguish between factual and opinion news statements (Mitchell et al. 2018); political participation (Edgerly et al. 2018); and vote choice (Tyson 2018). These issues are directly connected to citizens' power and status, but we do not yet understand the consequences related to COVID-19. The current pandemic may be exacerbating the effects of this widening gulf, creating inequalities in Americans' media diets. There is a pressing need to understand under what circumstances inequality and polarized information produce, or fail to produce, compliance with government policies and an altered risk of infection or death. Throughout the pandemic, messages by government officials have differed across time, place, and source. This disparity of information provides an opportunity to explore the impact of attention to different forms of communication and messages. In addition, news companies have had diverse information and dissemination strategies which merit exploration, especially regarding effects on audiences. COVID-19 created serious and tangible consequences to differential exposure to such messaging and content.

### *Science and Education in Society*

Public trust mediates the efficacy of public institutions. If people do not have trust in their institutions, the ability of government to bring citizens on board with public policy decisions is drastically reduced. Partisan messaging, polarization, and de-investment in public education have reduced trust in science and scientific findings (McCright et al. 2013; Oreskes and Conway 2010; Otto 2016). While studies linking trust in science to policy opinions are important, the current crisis emphasizes the need to understand not only whether people think positively about science in general abstract terms, but under what conditions they accept or reject scientific advice. This is especially vital when it comes to scientific statements or recommendations that are politically

controversial, hard to enact, or individually inconvenient, all of which are on display during the COVID-19 pandemic and are ripe for further investigation. Moreover, the government response to the pandemic, including widespread public exposure to scientific arguments like “flattening the curve”, and coverage of public health officials speaking alongside political leaders, may itself shape views of science and its credibility.

### *Civic Networks and Information Exchange*

Information and resources are exchanged in communities at a variety of levels. Individuals exchange information, and those who are more embedded in informational networks have more power to survive disasters (Klinenberg 2015). Information is also exchanged between different institutions, levels of government, parties, and political leaders. The pattern and manner of such exchanges have been shown to impact public action during periods of social disruption (Garnett and Kouzmin 2007). Communication gaps, missed signals, information technology failures, turf battles, misunderstandings, and deliberate misinterpretations may alter or delay institutional and individual response. More connected communities may create more responsive policy, particularly during fast-moving crises (Aldrich 2011a, 2011b). To understand the role of these linkages in saving lives, it is necessary to observe people embedded in places and institutions (home, work, schools, churches, civic groups, etc.), and study how linkages among people and groups may contribute to better, more responsive policy. We are interested in both digital-first networks, such as Facebook Groups and WeChat information streams, and in-person groups that transitioned their networks to alternative forums, such as drive-up churches and community groups moving to online meetings. The importance of linkages among groups also applies to state and local governments, which may rely on networks of other elected officials to evaluate policies.

### *Creating Behavior Change*

Attitude rarely matches behavior. The gap between attitude and behavior may widen when assessment of risk is low and cost to action is high (Campbell 1963). The more difficult it is to engage in the behavior, relative to the cost of not acting, the more likely attitudes are to differ from behavior. Over the course of the outbreak, scientific experts and authorities have made behavioral suggestions, ranging in difficulty from low-level suggestions like washing hands regularly to high-level suggestions such as self-quarantining or sheltering in place. Additionally, public messages from political leaders often focus specifically on behaviors, some of which are in sharp contrast to one another, such as advocating social distancing versus encouraging people to visit bars and restaurants. The way in which the pandemic has taken hold and continues to unfold in communities will depend, in part, on the ability to transform information into attitudes, and transform attitudes into behavioral change. We are interested in research addressing any mechanism or effects along this attitude-behavior chain.

### *Partisanship and Trust in Government*

The public's trust in government plays a central role in how people respond to public policies that entail personal sacrifices. Yet, trust in government is increasingly polarized along party lines (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Over the course of the initial COVID-19 pandemic response, officials at the state and federal levels have called upon the public to sacrifice their livelihoods to save lives, but these calls differ widely across region, political party, and other cleavages. To understand how the public responds when the government asks people to sacrifice for the good of their neighbors, the state, and the nation, we can look at a number of questions: How does trust in different levels of government shape reactions to policy measures, including those that rely on citizen goodwill to implement? Under what circumstances does polarized trust in government alter the public response to policies? And, what is the impact of governmental policies during the pandemic on trust itself?

### *Social Upheaval and Disruption*

Pandemics can spark different types of social upheavals. Some pandemics create hate and blame, while others foster unity and cooperation (Cohn 2012). In the United States, local and regional differences in media, political cleavages, economic contraction, and policy response create a complex map of different forms of social disruption, sparking protests in some areas and solidarity displays in others. Pre-existing social inequalities, combined with the differential impact of the economic consequences of the government's pandemic response on various racial and socioeconomic groups, may drive decisions about collective actions, such as protests or walk-outs. Communities have different policy responses, creating differential experiences of disruption, hardship, and suffering, all of which are important areas of further examination. Understanding the placement, timing, and catalysts of social disruption, and subsequent protest, we have already seen during the COVID-19 pandemic is key to reducing long-term harms caused by the pandemic.

### *Resilience and Recovery through the Lens of Inequality*

The consequences of COVID-19 will not end with a cure or vaccine, and this call is focused on initial studies of the social and political dynamics of the pandemic. We know that pandemic-type events can have long-term behavioral and attitudinal consequences, but that those effects often mirror or exacerbate issues of existing inequality. For instance, mortality during the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic has been linked to differential changes in municipal spending preferences and voter extremism in pre-Nazi Germany (Blickle 2020). But we also see immediate cultural change. Disasters may spark extremism, but they may also create solidarity (Cohn 2012), strengthen network connections (Kim and Hastak 2018), and impact preferences for social spending (Blickle 2020). While the social and political consequences of COVID-19 will depend on how the public makes sense of the pandemic, and governmental response and recovery, we

know these mechanisms are often themselves unequal. Research is needed to understand how the pandemic might create initial attitude and behavior changes across different groups, and the consequences of those changes. Differences may be related to residential segregation, poverty or near-poverty living conditions, health disparities, race, ethnicity, power, social class, prestige, gender or gender identity, or issues of limited access to services. Popular discussion of the ‘new-normal’ suggests Americans are aware this pandemic may reshape their social fabric, altering power, status, resource, cultural, political, and social structures. How these post-COVID changes will be differential across groups, with particular attention to inequality, is a matter of significant scientific concern.

## **Anticipated Timeline**

**Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on November 3, 2020 to:**

**[rsf.fluxx.io](https://rsf.fluxx.io)**

**(NOTE that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline.)**

All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to **[rsf.fluxx.io](https://rsf.fluxx.io)** will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at [journal@rsage.org](mailto:journal@rsage.org) and not to the email addresses of the editors of the issue.

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on June 11, 2021 (with a dinner the night before). The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 5/11/21**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 9/30/21. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 3/10/22. The full and final issue will be published in the fall of 2022. Papers will be published open access on the RSF website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.

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