Pandemic Resilience: Reinventing Public Governance
with Danielle Allen

EXISTENTIAL THREATS

The COVID-19 crisis caught the United States and much of the western world woefully underprepared. Local leaders and decision-makers must consider what it will take not just to see their communities through this crisis, but also to **redefine and recommit to good governance and create an infrastructure of resilience**. This requires an **integration of perspective**.

On top of the pandemic, the US faces snowballing crises that together constitute an immediate **existential threat** to our democracy. These include but are not limited to:

- The **racial disparities** in health outcomes for COVID-19 patients,
- The ever-growing evidence of (often lethal) **discriminatory practices** in our criminal-justice systems,
- The increasing **polarization** of public opinion, and
- The **economic fallout** of mass quarantine.

All of these are flashing red alerts telling us that **our social contract is failing** to secure the liberties, the opportunities, and the mutual care necessary for full human flourishing. What does this mean for the effort to suppress the virus, begin the work of recovery, and establish resilience?

PANDEMIC RESILIENCE THROUGH GOOD GOVERNANCE

An integrated perspective recognizes pandemic resilience as *the capacity of a society to overcome existential threats to health and wellbeing (including the economic foundations thereof) by tapping into the resources of solidarity flowing from a healthy social contract.*

A healthy social contract rests on the proposition that you don't abandon anyone.

Any decent regime facing existential threats has to rise to the challenge of restoring safety and wellbeing—material security—for the people. This is the most fundamental building block of political legitimacy.

In 21st century democracies, however, there are additional necessary conditions for legitimacy. These go beyond basic material security to include the protection of individual autonomy and dignity—and the opportunity to flourish fully—through:

- negative liberties (freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and so on),
- positive liberties (our rights to participate in collective self-government),
- social rights (that allow us to make full use of our negative and positive liberties), and
- social equality and nondiscrimination

Diversity of the World's Regime Types: 21st Century Frame

	Regime category	Basic material security	Negative liberties/ rights	Positive liberties/ rights	Social rights	Social Equality / non-discrimination
Well-ordered regimes	Egalitarian Participatory Democracy	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Constitutional Democracy	Y	Y	Y	Y	?
	Rights-protecting autocratic regimes	Y	Y	N	Y	?
	Material well-being protecting authoritarian/autocratic regimes	Y	N	N	Y	?
Outlaw regimes	Non-decent, rights-violating regimes	N	N	N	N	N

There are four key features of democratic governance that are both necessary and (taken together) sufficient for ensuring democratic legitimacy and resilience.

- **Integrative policy-making processes** that identify and bring together relevant expertise not just on specific questions of material wellbeing, but across all five dimensions in the chart above—and craft these into a structure for judgment.
- **Public education efforts** that share the process of diagnosing components of the problem and identifying solution pathways clearly and transparently with the public.
- **Negative and positive liberties protections** that allow the public to build solidarity as a key resource of a healthy social contract.
- **Social rights protections and non-discrimination policies** that respond to weaknesses in the social contract as they are revealed.

Holding fast to our commitments to civil liberties, it's clear that the surveillance and control tools China and other authoritarian governments have relied on to control the spread of disease are off the table as a means to pandemic resilience.

This means **we have to rely on key resources of the social contract: solidarity and volunteerism**.
- How can we ensure that the **basic relations among the citizenry and the existing forms of mutual commitment** effectively shore up the kind of **solidarity** it takes to do hard things together in a time of crisis?
- How can we build the **capacity** to accurately **identify and organize around a common purpose**?

To become resilient, **we have to address the rifts in our social contract and social fabric**.

As colleagues note in their paper on building solidarity in the context of this pandemic:

> A notion of "shared threat" can be a compelling foundation for building solidarity, but objective differences in risk and capacity to respond, as well as underlying group-based and partisan cleavages, make building and sustaining solidarity extremely difficult under any circumstances, and especially in the current crisis. *Nonetheless, policy makers and other influencers cannot neglect a focus on solidarity in favor of purely "technical" solutions, because the efficacy of the latter will depend on the former.*

Our overall societal **objectives for pandemic response** are to meet the public health emergency with public health mitigation strategies that

1) are **coordinated and evidence-based**;
2) enable us to **secure our health infrastructure** in service of fighting the pandemic
3) protect **civil liberties**
4) **do not perpetrate injustice** and
5) **mitigate** the effects of the disease
   a) **without destroying the economy** and material supports of society and
   b) while preserving the **durability and sustainability of the institutions necessary for constitutional democracy**.

As soon as we are beginning to move towards recovery, we need to add two further objectives to our decision-making framework:

1) **Lay in capacity and habits for ongoing life with a virus** of this kind and its periodic return and
2) **Plan for and set clear objectives for a transition** off an emergency footing.[1]

A TRANSFORMED PEACE

This pandemic has delivered unwelcome but perhaps unsurprising news to us about the limits of our solidarity. Too many people have been willing to abandon our elders, our essential workers, our schoolchildren, our Black and Hispanic neighbors, unhoused and incarcerated people, and the rural and urban poor. And many of us have been too willing to cede our liberties indefinitely or to use them abusively.

This is because we are afraid. And we are afraid *because we know that we are also abandoning one another in times of relative peace and prosperity.*

Our lack of commitment to one another and to constitutional democracy has brought us here.

If we are to get to the post-COVID world we are dreaming of—a transformed peace—**we must make and act on the following commitments** now:

- We will protect our elders and our workers.
- We will give the young the tools they need to launch.
- We will empower and provide a foundation for health for our neighbors in need—regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference or gender expression.

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[1] https://ethics.harvard.edu/files/center-for-ethics/files/corrected_white_paper_1.pdf

- We will activate our liberties through civic education and engagement, and support for good governance.

Acting meaningfully on these commitments involves a paradigm change. We must reorient our understanding of public governance:

1. **Critical resources** for resilience must include not just revenues but also the trust and solidarity necessary for effective governance.
2. **Competitiveness** must focus not just on economic security and public safety but also on civic strength.
3. **Economic foundations** must include care, health, and wellbeing as the base on which prosperity is built.
4. **Disparate impact** of common threats must be redefined as a source of vulnerability *for all*.

To activate public governance for resilience, mayors should focus on:

- **Strengthening the social contract:** Lead with the democratic values of justice, health, and inclusion.
- **Integrating expertise:** Lead holistically and include expertise on equity across the board.
- **Linking institutions:** Lead collaboration across sectors to build civic strength.
- **Public education:** Lead public engagement in the process of diagnosing problems, generating ideas, and implementing solutions.