

America's Coronavirus Response Is Shaped By Its Federal Structure

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As coronavirus spreads across the globe, states grapple to find the ideal strategy for coping with the global pandemic. And, in China, Singapore, South Korea, the US, the UK, and Europe, divergent policies are a product of state capacity and legal authority, but they also reveal competing views about the optimal role of centralised state authority, federalism, and the private sector.

Although it is too soon to know the longer-term effects, the apparent capacity of centralised state authority in China, South Korea and Singapore to respond effectively and rapidly is making headlines. In the United States, the opposite has been true.

America's response is being shaped by its federal structure, a dynamic private sector, and a culture of civic engagement. In the three weeks since the first US case of coronavirus was confirmed, state leaders, public health institutions, corporations, universities and churches have been at the vanguard of the nation's effort to mitigate its spread.

Images of safety workers in hazmat suits disinfecting offices of multinational corporations and university campuses populate American Facebook pages. The contrast to the White House effort to manage the message, downplay, then rapidly escalate, its estimation of the crisis is stark.

Bewildering response

For European onlookers, the absence of a clear and focused response from the White House is bewildering. By the time President Trump declared a national emergency, several state emergencies had already been called, universities shifted to online learning, and churches began to close.

By contrast, in Italy, France, Spain and Germany, the state has led national efforts to shutter borders and schools. In the UK, schools are largely remaining open as Prime Minister Johnson has declared a strategy defined by herd immunity, which hinges on exposing resilient populations to the virus.

But America has never shared Europe's conviction that the state must lead. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the leading national public health institute and US federal agency, has attempted to set a benchmark for assessing the crisis and advising the nation, but in this instance, its response has been slowed due to faults in the initial tests it attempted to rollout. The Federal Reserve has moved early to cut interest rates and cut them again even further this week.

But states were the real first movers in America's response and have been using their authority to declare a state of emergency independent of the declaration of a national emergency. This has allowed states to mobilize critical resources, and to pressure cities into action. After several days delay and

intense public pressure, New York Governor Cuomo forced New York City Mayor de Blasio to close the city's schools.

Declarations of state emergencies by individual states has given corporations, universities and churches the freedom and legitimacy to move rapidly, and ahead of the federal government, to halt the spread in their communities.

Washington state was the first to declare a state of emergency. Amazon, one of the state's leading employers, quickly announced a halt to all international travel and, alongside Microsoft, donated \$1million to a rapid response Seattle-based emergency funds. States have nudged their corporations to be first movers in the sector's coronavirus response. But corporations have willingly taken up the challenge, often getting ahead of state as well as federal action.

Google moved rapidly to announce a move allowing employees to work from home after California declared a state of emergency. Facebook soon followed with an even more stringent policy, insisting employees work from home. Both companies have also met with World Health Organization (WHO) officials to talk about responses, and provided early funding for the WHO's Solidarity Response Fund set up in partnership with the UN Foundation and the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation.

America's leading research universities, uniquely positioned with in-house public health and legal expertise, have also been driving preventive efforts. Just days after Washington declared a state of emergency, the University of Washington became the first to announce an end to classroom teaching and move courses online. A similar pattern followed at Stanford, Harvard, Princeton and Columbia - each also following the declaration of a state of emergency.

In addition, the decision by the Church of the Latter Day Saints to cancel its services worldwide followed Utah's declaration of a state of emergency.

The gaping hole in the US response has been the national government. President Trump's declaration of a national emergency came late, and his decision to ban travel from Europe but - at least initially - exclude the UK, created uncertainty and concern that the White House response is as much driven by politics as evidence.

This may soon change, as the House of Representatives has passed a COVID-19 response bill that the Senate will consider. These moves are vital to supporting state and private efforts to mobilise an effective response to a national and global crisis.

Need for public oversight

In the absence of greater coordination and leadership from the centre, the US response will pale in comparison to China's dramatic moves to halt the spread. The chaos across America's airports shows the need for public oversight. As New York State Governor Cuomo pleaded for federal government support to build new hospitals, he said: 'I can't do it. You can't leave it to the states'.

When it comes to global pandemics, we may be discovering that authoritarian states can have a short-term advantage, but already Iran's response demonstrates that this is not universally the case. Over time, the record across authoritarian states as they tackle the coronavirus will become more apparent and it is likely to be mixed.

Open societies remain essential. Prevention requires innovation, creativity, open sharing of information, and the ability to inspire and mobilise international cooperation. The state is certainly necessary, but it is not sufficient alone.