

HOW COVID-19 CHANGED “THE ANATOMY” OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

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Abstract

COVID-19 has rapidly affected our everyday life, businesses, disrupted the world trade and movements. It also impacted electoral processes around the world, changing everything – from how the campaign is conducted to voter engagement. Pandemic has canceled meetings, conventions, door-to door canvassing and moved a part of campaigning to the digital realm.

While some countries have decided to go ahead with elections, others with elections scheduled in 2020 have postponed them. Among those that have held elections during the pandemic, the South Korea has emerged as a model for having organised a highly successful electoral process, while protecting the health of its population. Others, such as the US, have set in general a very negative standard, ignoring health risks and putting both population and politicians in danger. However, it was a sharp difference between two competing candidates: Donald Trump and Joe Biden were taking very different approaches to campaigning during the pandemic and one of main difference was the way how they comply with pandemic rules.

This paper analyses how COVID-19 rewrote the rules of political campaigning in different parts of the worlds, taking as model for comparison the South Korea, the United States, Romania and the Republic of Moldova election campaigns.

1. Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has exposed democracies around the world to considerable challenges in holding free and fair periodic elections. Throughout the past decades, they already have been faced various major crisis situations that have undermined states' capacities to hold elections, such as natural disasters, situations of armed conflict, terrorism, and other emergency situations, however, they typically had a more localised impact on elections.³ In case of COVID-19, countries are under emergencies at the national level, the authorities being in the forefront of dealing with the consequences of this health crises, disrupting hundreds of elections scheduled in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been presenting severe challenges to the management and scheduling of elections across the world. There are two main options when it comes to addressing the issues the

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³ For instance, hurricane Katrina that hit New Orleans during local elections in 2005 destroyed the electoral infrastructure and made voting insecure in many areas. As a remedy, wide postal voting options were provided to displaced voters as well as to those who could not vote in their home constituencies. In 2014 and 2015, Ukraine agreed to postpone elections in some territories against the backdrop of the armed conflict in the East.

pandemic poses to holding elections, postponement or the introduction of special voting arrangements to mitigate the threat of spreading the virus. Both options present challenges for electoral integrity and poses risks. Mitigation measures or the postponement of elections may encroach upon the right to political participation, as well as, upon the related freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and movement. If an election is postponed indeterminately, the criterion of legitimacy of government is at stake. Thus, striking a balance between these two is not an easy choice. Should the fulfilment of the social contract between a government and its citizens come at the expense of endangering their health and lives? Or should concerns related to the outbreak, as a result of the mass gatherings inherent to the societal ritual of voting, prevail over other considerations? Decisions are usually best made to suit local conditions and circumstances. There are some universal questions and concerns that can be asked about the running of elections and challenges that each of these options pose when the decision to hold or postpone the election is being put forward in this research paper.

2. Challenges to postpone the election during pandemics

Democracy is characterized by civic responsibility, exercised by all adult citizens, directly, or through their freely elected representatives. Therefore, a democracy holds regular and periodic elections. [6] This requirement is enshrined into Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and after specified in Article 25 of the UN International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), among other requirements, such as universal and equal suffrage; the right to stand for public office and contest elections; the rights of all eligible electors to vote; the use of a secret ballot process; genuine elections; elections that reelect the free expression of the will of the people.[11] These core standards and principles represent the conceptualizations of electoral integrity, that shall apply universally to all countries worldwide throughout all stages in the electoral cycle, including during the pre-electoral period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath. [34] However, there are situations when elections cannot be held due to different reason, such as natural or man-made hazards emergencies. In these cases, states can derogate from their obligations under civil and political rights treaties in face of the crisis situations. The conditions set in the respective treaties' emergency clauses - Article 4 ICCPR and Article 15 ECHR - are quite similar stipulating that "in time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation", states may derogate from their obligations to the extent "strictly required by the exigencies of the situation".⁴ COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious humanitarian case for delaying the conduct of elections where it might bring about immediate threats to human health and life.⁵ Data collected and regularly updated by International IDEA in its "Global overview of COVID-19: Impact on Elections" confirms that during 2020, at least 75 countries and territories - faced with the prospect of potentially spreading the virus by holding their national and subnational elections under the pandemic have so far opted for deferring the vote. [10]

The postponement of elections purports several challenges and national authorities shall be aware of them. The humanitarian case for postponing elections shall be strictly time-limited to that necessary

⁴ See Article 15 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides for the possibility of derogating in case of emergencies.

⁵ The circumstances are not new since in the past it occurred several situations when the elections were postponed due to epidemic reasons. Elections that have previously been postponed for public health reasons. For instance, in West Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia during the Ebola crisis (2013-2016), elections were postponed for public health reasons. In 2009, in Mexico campaign restrictions were introduced during the Swine Flu epidemic to prevent the spread of the virus.

to make elections deliverable, otherwise there are incentives for leaders to exacerbate an emergency. Postponing a vote also could mean that leaders and representatives who are not necessarily doing a good job will remain in office for longer. Citizens will be temporarily denied their right to shape public policy - perhaps at exactly the moment when they need. Therefore, postponement should be the last resort as the citizen need to be reassured that democratic life will continue.

In some cases, there are concerns that a government may capitalise on a crisis to avoid holding an election at all. Incumbent governments could be given an opportunity to reschedule at a moment when the opinion polls are more favourable. Moreover, election postponement does seem to be playing out differently by regime type. An analysis suggests that no democracies that have postponed without agreeing upon a new election date. [13] However, there are major risks in hybrid regime, such as Ethiopia, or in autocracies, like in case of Chad and Somalia, that have postponed but not rescheduled their elections.⁶

Postponement of elections often comes with various impacts on the regulatory framework governing elections. This includes practical considerations regarding, for example, the setting of different legal timeframes/deadlines, the registration of voters and candidates, the determination of the duration of campaign and monitoring of campaign finance, and the procedures for election dispute resolution. Importantly, different situations need to be distinguished. It is important that any changes made between the two election dates do not, or to the most minimal extent possible, interfere with the fundamental principles of democratic elections, namely the universal, free, equal and secret suffrage.[8] This includes preserving an equal level playing field among contestants, most importantly refraining from abusing the postponement of elections as a means of giving an advantage to the incumbent. The shorter the gap between the originally scheduled and the postponed election is, the less impact may be expected due to discontinuation of the electoral processes.⁷

3. Challenges to hold election during pandemics

While more than 75 countries postponed voting, 79 countries and territories have held national or subnational elections despite concerns related to COVID-19 [10], taking the difficult, and perhaps more dangerous road of still going ahead with their scheduled elections. The holding of local and regional elections in times of major crises may entail numerous practical challenges and risks. First, holding elections as originally scheduled may jeopardize public health and safety. Elections are large social events and bring millions of people together, making it difficult to maintain social distance. Special voting arrangements are necessary, posing new impediments to the transparency of the electoral process and adding financial and administrative pressures to ensure the safety of voters. [7] James and Alihodzic identified five key challenges to holding elections and maintaining electoral integrity during natural disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic. [12]

⁶ While the absence of an election date in Ethiopia has added more political turmoil in Ethiopia, the elections in Chad have been postponed five times since 2015 before COVID-19 caused this year's postponement.

⁷ In the 2020 postponed presidential elections in Poland where the elections were held only de jure but no voting took place on the Election Day until new elections were announced and held almost two months later. In terms of particular impacts of election postponements, after the 2020 postponed elections in Poland, it was criticised that legal amendments to the electoral law adopted between the originally scheduled and the postponed election jeopardised the stability and clarity of the election legislation and had practical implications for candidate registration, campaigning and campaign finance, voting methods, and resolution of election disputes.

3.1. Threats to the opportunities for deliberation

Emergencies can fundamentally undermine opportunities for deliberation since they depend on information and news content from independent journalists. Campaigning can become restricted during emergency situations as many countries have imposed lockdowns during COVID-19 pandemic to prevent mass gatherings and citizens from leaving their house. In these circumstances, opportunities for campaigning become much more limited. Some candidates, having concerns for their supporters, may avoid political meetings and door-to-door canvassing. To some extent, electoral contestant may be dependent on the media to get their message out. Creative use of online platforms and digital technology is the safest way to facilitate engagement between voters and candidates. There is strong evidence that natural disasters do change voter preferences as the management of the crisis becomes the salient issue rather than other subjects.⁸ This might be a lifeline for those who manage crises well but have a poor record on other issues during the mandate, and vice versa.

3.2. Equal opportunities for all candidates

Some candidates have a great advantage if they enter the campaign period with a concentration of resources and/or if they are backed by wealthy donors, however incumbents might have access to state resources, such as influence over the state-owned media sources. [23] During pandemic, in states where incumbents have control over the state media they may be able to continue to use this important campaign tool, while opposition parties remain unable to mobilize if they are restricted by lockdowns or weak communication infrastructure. Moldovan President Igor Dodon and Polish President Andrzej Duda used the same tactics and made television appearances at border checkpoints, hospitals, food banks, meeting convoys of aid from other countries (Dodon) and new production lines of hand sanitizer (Duda) during the early campaign of the 2020 presidential election, while opposition parties were unable to participate in such actions. Incumbent advantage over newcomer candidates can be more pronounced during a pandemic as the management of the crisis can become a more salient issue for voters than other subjects.

In South Korea, the incumbent government, formed by the Democratic Party, secured the largest majority since the first democratic elections in 1987. Although, in January 2020, the party's prospects had not looked so good due to economic issues and political scandals, the government's successful management of the COVID-19 response was credited with its election victory. In the Republic of Moldova, it was quite the reverse. Before pandemic Dodon's rating remained high, however, pandemic poor management, his negative rhetoric, and restrictions at the border against diaspora contributed to his defeat in the elections.

3.3. Equality of participation

During pandemic the main question is how all groups of voters can vote safely? Besides special measures to ensure the safety of all voters, there are necessary alternative measure, such as introducing or extending postal or mobile voting that are required to facilitate those most vulnerable to the virus, self-isolated or have the virus at the time of election. Early voting or voting over several days, is another option to spread the voter traffic and facilitate social distancing.

⁸ See for instance, Atkeson, L. R. and Cherie D.M., *Catastrophic politics: How extraordinary events redefine perceptions of government*, Cambridge University Press 2012. Lazarev, E. et al., *Trial by fire: A natural disaster's impact on support for the authorities in rural Russia*, in *World Politics*, 2014.

Democratic elections in ideal situation shall be characterized by the high turnout and equal levels of participation across different groups in a society. Without this the result of an election may be shaped by some groups more than others. For instance, in the Republic of Moldova the participation in the election is characterized mostly by the involvement of elder groups and lack of participation of young voters aged 18-25 years.⁹ Moreover, according to James and Garnett major threat to political equality within a country are because of uneven levels of participation, which are often partially driven by uneven access to resources and external factors. [14]

3.4. Robust electoral management delivery

The successful implementation of elections also depends on large, temporary, and experienced workforce. However, emergencies like COVID-19 can create serious logistical problems as these workforces may be not available to deliver an election [15]. Moreover, there are necessary additional funding to run safe and accessible elections during the pandemic, to provide suitable venues for voting and counting, appropriate personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer for voters and election workers along with other measures to facilitate social distancing.

3.5. Institutional certainty

Although there are numerous challenges to be overcome in holding an election during pandemic, going ahead with an election provides political stability and encourages the participation of voters as they come to believe that there will be an opportunity to remove the incumbent from office, if the last one have not delivered electoral promises. When the decision to postpone the election during a pandemic yields powers that translate to political and electoral advantages of the incumbent, then the election could be considered “canceled” and/or the next election would more than probably bring victory to the incumbent. [12] For instance, in March 2020 Hungary’s parliament has passed a new set of coronavirus measures, including jail terms for spreading misinformation, which allows prime minister Viktor Orbán to rule by decree. However, these measure gives no clear time limit to a state of emergency, providing that “strengthening and extending the decrees issued during the state of emergency and give the government authorisation to issue decrees for an indefinite term as long as the state of emergency is in effect.”[18] This included provisions that no local or national elections or referendums could be held until the end of the state of emergency. Following this event, the international mass media and scientific community even stated that “the coronavirus had killed its first democracy”.¹⁰ Even where such power-politics tactics are not being played, the sudden uncertainty in the electoral timetable might erode trust amongst rivals and citizens. However, when the postponement does not diminish political opportunities for other political actors - and even opens space for more solidarity and unity - then it would fit more neatly into the humanitarian postponement category.

⁹ For 2020 presidential election their participation was 8.08% on November 1, 2020, and it increased to 8.44% in November 15, 2020.

¹⁰ “I don’t know of another democracy where the government has effectively asked for a free hand to do anything for however long,” Renata Uitz, director of the comparative constitutional law program at Central European University in Budapest. See for instance, Coronavirus kills its first democracy, Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/03/31/coronavirus-kills-its-first-democracy/>. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

4. Lessons from the elections in the time of pandemic

4.1. Highly politicized COVID-19

One clear feature of the 2020 elections was the politicization of every element of the electoral administration response to the pandemic in each country that opted out to hold an election. These countries took various steps to reduce the risk of voters and election officials contracting the new coronavirus disease. Indisputably, planning elections during a pandemic is challenging. Officials worldwide have struggled with securing enough funding to implement safety precautions, expanding mail-in voting, and communicating changes with the public, among other obstacles. Despite all differences and organizing the elections, a common factor for all election campaigns was the fact that COVID-19 was highly politicized and used as a campaigning tool, starting from its origin, incumbent government response, confidence in scientists, and support for protective actions, dividing societies almost in each democracy, around the world.

The first elections held during COVID-19 were closely watched and not only over the issue of how the government's early handling of the pandemic was managed but from a more global perspective. Many lessons have been drawn from their successes and failures in mitigating the impact of the pandemic on the election, providing answers for the most important question: it is possible to organize election without exposing voters and polling station officials to increased health risks? South Korea, which elections for the country's 300-seat National Assembly closely monitored and widely reported on by international media, proved that such outcome is possible. As in much of the world, the pandemic has dominated South Korean politics in 2020. Seoul's approach has been highly nationalist and politicized, as the ruling party lauded its pandemic response as the global standard and linked it to a larger, leftist-nationalist agenda. South Korea, along with China, has demonstrated a highly nationalist and politicized model of pandemic containment, linking a country's pandemic response to its global status and to the ruling party's political agenda. A nationalist approach facilitates collective mobilization and sacrifice to contain the pandemic, linking national pride to COVID-19 containment and but also come at large costs when it is about privacy.

In the US, these instances of the coronavirus pandemic have been exploited to oversee the actualisation of policy agendas in the election year, however, the incumbents undermined the threat posed by the pandemic. President Donald Trump impeded prospects of any multilateral cooperation by exploiting the pandemic as an opportunity to actualise the "America first" agenda vis-à-vis China, Mexico and Iran. Ahead of the 2020 elections, the "Chinese virus" presented Trump with an opportunity to once again make China a centerpiece in his run for the presidency. The US shifted blame on China not only for his administration's poor management of pandemic but also for its repercussions on American economy starting February 2020, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average plunged 9,000 points, effectively wiping out all gains made during his presidency. When Trump announced his support for industry bailout packages, he posted a tweet suggesting China was "responsible for the global economic damage". Thus, the interlinking of the already slowing American economy to the "Chinese virus" figured prominently in Trump's rhetoric's during all his campaign. If in 2016, Donald Trump's populist takeover of the Republican Party occurred largely due to his capitalisation on Americans' anxieties with the US' traditional commitment to globalization, in 2020, mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic was also the main reason why Trump lost the election.

4.2. COVID-19 impact on the ability of political parties to campaign and reach their audiences

The COVID-19 outbreak also significantly affected the methods conventionally used by political parties and candidates to conduct their election campaigns. More conventionally, the candidates were able to send their campaign materials and information about their platforms to voters through printed election-related information booklets distributed to households nationwide. However, the tried and tested on-ground approach - where armies of volunteers go from door-to-door interacting with voters, hard-selling their presidential candidate by extolling their many virtues, holding large public rallies, fundraising cocktail parties, handshaking has taken a back seat for the Democratic Party in the US and candidates in South Korea. Yet, this was not the case for ex-President Trump, representatives of the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) in Romania or for half of Moldovan presidential candidates.

Election campaigns in the middle of a pandemic need creative ways to reach voters as the restrictions oblige electoral contestants to resort to alternative campaigning methods to reach out their voters. Here, there have been virtually no limits to the creativity displayed for this. For example, in South Korea candidates have showed up on trucks, riding electric scooters or even horses. To reach voters, political parties and candidates had to change their conventional campaigning method, shifting to online and digital technology, mainly video messages disseminated through social media platforms, SMS and mobile phone apps.

For Korean elections, electoral events involved only very small groups and were restricted to the distribution of information leaflets. Inevitably, election campaigning activities for the 2020 elections had a much lower profile than in any previous election. The bulk of election campaigning was taking place online, on Facebook, Instagram and KaKaoTalk. Almost all candidates have their own YouTube channel. Some candidates went as far as using innovative methods, employing augmented reality (AR) technology, allowing supporters to digitally express their endorsement to his election pledges through a mobile application and their phone cameras. [28] Other candidates launched AR mobile services that enabled voters to digitally meet and interact with a 3D animated party's character. Some candidates conducted volunteer COVID-19-related work. For instance, a popular trend among candidates in South Korea was to show themselves disinfecting public facilities and playgrounds, obviously with protective breathing masks, which more often made it difficult for voters to remember their faces.

In the US, both the Democratic and Republican parties held their nominating conventions online for 2020 elections, a significant alteration of the usual practice of gathering party delegates and office holders. After COVID-19 restrictions relaxed over the summer, the rate of infection rose from September 2020 progressively¹¹, leading to a decrease in traditional campaign strategies, such as door-to-door canvassing, public events, and large rallies. As of September 2020, the two main campaigns diverged considerably in their approach. The Biden campaign suspended in-person canvassing at the beginning of the pandemic and has stood by that approach, saying it does not want to put people at risk of contracting COVID-19. Meanwhile, Trump's campaign volunteers, according to their own words, knock on 1 million doors a week. [31]

¹¹ See Coronavirus: Why are infections rising again in US? BBC News, 8 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-54423928>. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

The Biden campaign promoted the idea that conversations matter - no matter the medium. Only in August 2020 it recorded 2,6 million conversations with swing state voters, mostly by phone or text message. [9] They also drop off literature door to door, however, canvassers likely did not seek out face-to-face conversations with voters. Biden himself has been a vocal advocate of mask use, and data from the Pew Research Center has found that Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to take the threat of the virus seriously. [32] Drive-in events have been a part of Biden's campaign - around 150 cars reportedly gathered to watch him accept the presidential nomination on the final night of the Democratic National Convention in Delaware in August 2020. Though down-ballot Democrats followed the rules for most of the pandemic, a handful of candidates in battleground states, such as Maine and Montana, were breaking with the Biden campaign and resuming door knocking.

While the Biden campaign has invested heavily in television advertising, particularly in six key swing states - Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Michigan, Wisconsin and Arizona¹², Trump had been trying to bridge the gap by heavily investing in digital advertisements on platforms like Facebook and Google.¹³

In Romania, Facebook was the main platform for promotion, being used by most of Romanians. AUR party benefited the most of online resources. The party had posts with tens of thousands of Facebook interactions and videos with more than million views, which can be considered as a record audience even for non-political content creators. AUR used all possible methods to promote their election messages on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram.[27] In addition, ignoring all the imposed restrictions, party's members used traditional campaign methods. The populist messages on reopening the schools and accusations launched at the entire political class on imposing a "dictatorship regime", help the party to get seats in the Romanian parliament, which under normal conditions had no chance to cross the electoral threshold. Other political parties used mainly live option and support groups on Facebook, according territorial party organisations. Private televisions, which are politically affiliated for most of them, also played an important role in broadcasting messages to the elderly voters.

In the Republic of Moldova all candidates resorted to traditional methods, however, social networks also were actively used by electoral contestants. Facebook remained the most popular platform, which was actively used to promote electoral messages. Through Facebook groups and live option, all candidates were able to contact voters nationwide and abroad. The two main contestants, Maia Sandu and Igor Dodon, used actively Instagram. In addition, PAS candidate Maia Sandu used Zoom platform to organize meetings with citizens in different parts of the country, this method being used first time for electoral meetings in the Republic of Moldova. Sandu used several social apps, including Tik-Tok, through each of them sending personalized messages depending on the target audience. Igor Dodon, created his own online show, entitled "The President responds", which was broadcasted weekly and aimed to address his political messages to voters and have a direct contact with them. These two candidates spent approximately 50% of the budget used in the election campaign for online promotion.¹⁴

¹² According to a report by the Washington Post, the Biden campaign spent around \$90 million on television ads between August 10 and September 7, four times more than the \$18 million spent by the Trump campaign.

¹³ Quoting data from Bully Pulpit Interactive, the Hill reported that the Trump campaign has spent about \$170 million on digital advertising on both platforms since 2019, while Biden has only spent \$90 million.

¹⁴ Maia Sandu spent MDL 2.700.000 and her opponent, socialist candidate, Igor Dodon MDL 2.000.000. Today Media, *Maia Sandu vs Igor Dodon: who spent more on advertising in the election campaign*, 16 November 2020, <http://media->

4.3. Ensuring a safe voting environment during COVID-19

South Korea, which international health experts have praised for its extensive precautions at polling places, reported no new cases related to its April 2020 election.[5] The election was held amid a declining caseload and with nationwide coronavirus restrictions still in place. In the election day, an additional 20,000 poll workers compared with previous election, were deployed to staff the election while about 550,000 army of staff were tasked to prepare polling booths, disinfect and mark the 14,330 polling stations to ensure that, the 29 million eligible voters observed a distancing of at least 1 meter apart in queue.[28] Temperature checks were mandatory for all voters, and for those whose temperatures were above 37.5 degrees or showed signs of respiratory complications were redirected to special polling booths with heightened precautions. Every official in charge in these booths was required to wear full-body protective gear. Voters were also required to wear mask, sanitize their hands and wear plastic gloves while at the polling station which they removed and discarded when leaving the polling stations. Special polling stations were also created for COVID-19 patients. Additionally, asymptomatic COVID-19 patients and recent returnees to the country under government-monitored self-isolation were given a specific time window on April 15, 2020 to visit polling stations, while being mandated to report their movements to the responsible local officials via phone or a mobile app.¹⁵ At each polling station, National Elections Commission (NEC) installed separate voting booths for this specific group of voters so that they would not come into contact with other virus-free voters. For confirmed COVID-19 patients with more serious symptoms staying at hospitals or designated treatment centres and unable to visit regular polling stations, NEC facilitated voting through “residential voting”. These COVID-19 patients had to submit an early application to receive a ballot via mail, which had to be returned to NEC.[28]

However, the situation in the US was quite the reverse. The two main campaigns of Republicans and Democrats diverged considerably in their approach. Despite the US had one of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases at the global level, ex-President Donald Trump reverted to the holding of large frequent in-person rallies that had been a feature of his successful 2016 campaign. Most of these events have been in violation of local or state restrictions on gatherings to limit the spread of COVID-19, bringing bring together thousands of supporters with little regard for social distancing and without wearing the masks. An analysis found that about half of the president’s 22 campaign rallies held between June and September 2020 were followed by a considerable surge in COVID-19 cases merely two weeks after the events, suggesting the events may have led to community spread.¹⁶ It also confirmed that counties that had a lower COVID-19 incidence prior to the rally and were more likely to have a visible increase in cases after the rally. The Trump administration has flouted public health guidance throughout the pandemic, and the president’s choice to continue holding large rallies is no exception. Trump’s political events have regularly violated state and local restrictions on gatherings. Both his White House and his campaign have fostered a culture that discourages commonsense mask-wearing and social distancing. By downplaying the severity and contagiousness of the virus - even after being hospitalized with the virus himself - and gathering tightly packed crowds in the nation’s COVID-19 hot spots, Trump jeopardizes the health of the very

azi.md/ro/stiri/maia-sandu-vs-igor-dodon-cine-cheltuit-mai-mult-pentru-publicitate-%C3%AEn-campania-electoral%C4%83. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

¹⁵ If an individual under this category showed up to a voting station without prior notice, or visited other places, they faced charges for violation of the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act No. 9847 of December 29, 2009.

¹⁶ A group of researchers conducted a study on 22 Trump campaign rallies and concluded that “these eighteen rallies ultimately resulted in more than 30,000 incremental confirmed cases of COVID-19 (and would) likely led to more than 700 deaths (not necessarily among attendees). Center for American Progress (CAP), Coronavirus (COVID-19) Data in the United States,” 2020, available at <https://github.com/nytimes/COVID-19-data>.”

people who turn out to support him. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party's nominee Joe Biden has kept in-person interaction to a minimum. He opted out for smaller in-person speeches, press conferences and round tables, where mask-wearing and social distancing were made mandatory. His campaign also organised a number of virtual rallies, socially distanced events with a small number of supporters, in combination with "drive-in" rallies where supporters stayed in their cars at a parking area or sports ground.

This dispersal of policy-setting and the heightened partisan divisions in US politics, meant that a unified response to the COVID-19 epidemic proved hard to reach in many states. In order to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provided guiding principles to ensure a safe voting process, these included maintaining social distance between voters, protective equipment such as face masks, sanitization and disinfectant and regularly cleaning and ventilation of polling stations, however, health and safety measures varied over time and by state.

In Romania, the government approved a special regulation for the presidential elections in November 2020, and social distance was introduced, at the entrance to each polling station, being mandatory to disinfect the hands, wear the a mask, which was allowed to remove only to recognize the voter's face. During the election campaign, to prevent the risks of disease and spread of COVID-19, meetings were banned allowing only less than 50 people to participate in, with a mandatory observance of the social distance and wearing masks.[21] Most of these rules have been followed by the majority of electoral contestants, who tried to show an example of responsibility in front of and toward citizens, except AUR party, which completely ignored the rules imposed by the government. The party's members showed skepticism about the existence of the virus and the seriousness of the consequences caused by it.¹⁷ George Simion, AUR party's leader have organized numerous protests against restrictions imposed by the government related to COVID-19 pandemics, inclusively against wearing protective masks, using the people's dissatisfaction for being in lockdown. Defying all the rules of protection, AUR party's promoters continued the election campaign as if COVID-19 did not even exist, organizing several rallies in different regions of the country with little regard for social distance and without wearing masks.

Moldovan Central Election Commission (CEC) approved a similar special regulation for the presidential elections of November 2020, coordinated with the public health authorities. On election day, strict health and safety measures were in place; social distance of 1.5 meters should be adhered to, face masks were mandatory and polling stations needed to provide disinfectant and clean the polling station periodically.[29] The CEC provided a face mask for every voter, large amounts of gloves, hand sanitizer, disinfectant, visors, thermometers and protective suits for election officials.[4] In some areas in the country where buildings were not in accordance with security requirements, people could vote in specially arranged tents.

Similar measure with those in Romania were implemented during the election campaign, however most of these rules were ignored by the candidates, and no one was sanctioned for these violations, although fines were imposed. The then incumbent President Igor Dodon, using his high dignitary status, visited some hospitals and other public institutions during his election campaign, which

¹⁷ George Simion, AUR party leader, even claimed that he did a test and he tested positive for coronavirus, although he had no symptoms. He said that this is an industry," Antena3, *George Simion (AUR), unexpected confession: I did a COVID-19 test and tested positive for coronavirus*, 12 December 2020, <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/george-simion-aur-pozitiv-coronavirus-588650.html>. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

disadvantaged the other participants. The official election campaign started on October 1, 2020, in the same day when Moldovan Extraordinary National Commission for Public Health establishes a state of emergency, declaring “Red Code” alert in the country. Group photos with candidates, little respect for social distance, and door-to-door canvassing in the process of collecting signatures and during campaign, contributed to around 40.000 new cases for the period of September - October 2020.¹⁸ According to the WHO, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Moldova on election day November, 1 2020 were 76.040 and 1,785 deaths. On December 1, 2020, two weeks after second election round, the number of cases in the Republic of Moldova exceeds 108.800 cases of coronavirus.[2] This increase is, however, is not attributed only to the conduct of elections and there are numerous intervening factors that account for the spread of COVID-19.[2]

4.4. Voter turnout during the coronavirus pandemic

One of the biggest concerns is that holding elections during a pandemic could result in lower voter turnout. Some countries suffered low voter turnout, causing citizens to question the elections’ legitimacy, while others saw high turnout and few coronavirus cases linked to voting. When officials do not widely communicate pandemic-related restrictions and electoral changes to the public, many citizens might skip voting out of fear they will contract the virus or out of confusion about where and how to vote.¹⁹

Exactly this scenario happened in Romania for the 2020 parliamentary election. After the proposal that the elections should be held in March 2021 was declined, Romania’s Prime Minister announced that elections were scheduled for December 6, 2020. The conditions in which the elections took place can only be characterised as challenging: the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated structural problems, including the near-collapse of the public health care system and this election was the fourth electoral contest in the last year and a half, resulting in general political fatigue. Amidst the second wave of the pandemic, Romania registered a new anti-record of 31.84% turnout, proving the evidence that high number of COVID-19 cases can increase absenteeism. Romanian diaspora was not motivated enough to go to the polls, even though 748 polling stations were organized abroad, only 265.490 citizens voted. The low presence at voting in Romania facilitated the entry of AUR, a right-wing conservative and nationalist political party which also had excellent mobilization of its electorate based on distrust in the existence of COVID-19. Having previously demonstrated statistically that the turnout plays an important role in the victory of right-wing forces, it brought out in the first place Social Democratic Party (PSD), a left-wing party of oligarchic origin.

On November 1, 2020, in the Republic of Moldova, eligible voters were able to cast their ballot in 2143 polling stations, of which 139 were organized for diaspora.[24] At some polling stations abroad, for instance France and Azerbaijan, the opening hours of the polling station were shortened due to local COVID-19 restrictions. It was reported that people were not able to vote at the polling station in Frankfurt (Germany) due to the limited number of ballots sent. People were urged to go to other polling stations in different cities. The OSCE reported that overall procedures were followed, but inadequate voting premises led to overcrowding.[24] The data showed that the voter turnout stood at 48,54 %, which was lower than the turnout in 2016 with 49,18 %.[1] Since none of the candidates received at least half of the votes, a second round was held on 15 November 2020.

¹⁸ See data from Woldometer, Moldova, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/moldova/>. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

¹⁹ More than 55% of Romanians considered that the parliamentary elections should be postponed, according to the IMAS/EuropaFM opinion barometer, 40.9%, considering that it is a good thing that they take place.

Citizens staying abroad had to comply with the pandemic rules of host countries that impeded some citizens to vote in some countries, however, the second round gathered at the poll stations a record number of 262.739 citizens (58,22%) [1], in comparison with the second round in 2016, which had a turnout of 53,45%. The high turnout even during pandemics may be explained by the willingness of the Moldovan people to end up economic, political, and social instability, which has been in the country for a long time and has caused population exodus. Moldovans casted their vote against dictatorship, corruption, and poverty for the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) candidate Maia Sandu, who built her image as an incorruptible politician and fighter against poverty. By constantly criticising how socialist government managed the pandemic crisis and using people's fears that socialist candidate can win again, Sandu mobilized the electorate in the country and abroad and was able to get 93% of total votes in diaspora.[33]

Turnout in the South Korean election was at its highest since 1992, accounting around 66%.[10] In showing up to the polls in such large numbers, South Koreans demonstrated a strong civic responsibility amid dire circumstances that forced them to put their health at risk to vote under a pandemic. Paradoxically, rather than keeping them away from the ballot boxes, the unprecedented situation ended up giving even more value to the exercise of their right to vote they voted as a way to defeat, at least symbolically, the COVID-19 virus. Some commentators noted that high turnout may be partially also due to recent electoral reform for lowering the voting age from 19 to 18 years[28], however, other explanations may be premised on the polarization between the Democratic Party and the United Future Party. The impeachment of former president Park Geun-hye and progressive policies under the Moon administration created a hyper-partisan atmosphere in the lead up to the election, in which voters became sharply divided on most issues. In this context, the COVID-19 outbreak seems to have created a sense of national crisis for all voters, turning voting into an important civic duty - a nation-saving act.²⁰

A similar situation was registered in 2020 US presidential election as it was characterized by the highest turnout rate in 120 years, with more than 158,2 million (66,7%) citizens²¹ casting their vote in a hope to change the situation in the country. One reason is that in these highly polarized times, people believe elections matter. The Gallup polling organization reported a record level of people saying that the election matters more than in previous years²² and claiming as arguments a lot of major issues facing the countries, such as coronavirus pandemic, social justice, the economy, immigration, health care, the environment etc. Where in-person early voting options were available, people showed up to vote. In some cases, they determinedly stood in lines for up to 11 hours.

4.5. Risk of populists raising to power during COVID-19

The 2008 financial crisis proved that new populist politicians may emerged in the most difficult times, offering deceptively simple and often extreme solutions to complex economic and policy questions. COVID-19 will likely have the same effect. Populism thrives on crisis, even depends on crisis. However, how populism plays out it depends on a country's political dynamics and institutions.[16] Emerging markets with weaker institutions are likely to see their civil liberties

²⁰ In the last public opinion poll before the election, 86,1% of South Koreans said they were paying attention to the April 15 election, and 79 per cent said that they would "certainly vote."

²¹ See analysis of Michael P. McDonald, 2020 November General Election Turnout Rates, <http://www.electproject.org/2020g>. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

²² See survey conducted by Megan Brennan, More voters than in prior years say election outcome matters, Gallup, October 19, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/322010/voters-prior-years-say-election-outcome-matters.aspx>. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

further eroded under authoritarian leaders such as Erdogan in Turkey and Bolsonaro in Brazil. Meanwhile, China is using its own comparatively successful crisis management as an endorsement of the superiority of its political and economic model. In developed markets, populist parties and politicians push centrist politicians further towards the extremes to stem voter losses.[16] In European parliaments with proportional voting, new parties can gain support quite quickly, which happened with Podemos in Spain and the Lega in Italy.

The mismanagement of COVID-19 has increased dissatisfactions among the population in many countries, which has been used by some politicians as an opportunity to get elected, by channeling their campaign on criticism of the incumbent government's management of pandemics and public health system. Populism, a top-down process, is a "plebiscitarian" form of linkage between the populist politician and their electorate.[3] Therefore, by using simple and repetitive language to espouse themes that place blame on political and economic elites for mismanagement of pandemic creates favorable conditions for populists to be elected. AUR party speculated as much as possible on the restrictions imposed during COVID-19 pandemic, accusing the government several times of using it as a pretext to ban protests. AUR representatives, many of them being controversial figures, spread fake news about COVID-19 statistics, convincing people that it does not exist, being used only to manipulate voters. They also actively promoted the anti-vaccine policy, being helped even by clergy who were skeptical on population vaccination. The party's representatives became popular on social media as a result of their positioning against measures taken by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic. AUR is described as supporting "anti-medicine, anti-vaccination" rhetoric.[20] The party's manifesto opposes secularism and condemns atheism, while at the same time claiming that Christians are persecuted in Romania.[19]

AUR's golden bus with the party's insignia was parked for weeks in Romania's capital main square, as well and tricolor tents installed near it. Several attempts to evacuate the protesters gave this Euroskeptical party, which promote xenophobic messages and conspiracy theories, the opportunity to victimize themselves and draw voters' sympathy. They didn't have a clear concept for the development of the country, however, only using populist messages managed to get 9% of voters' preferences and enter the Romanian parliament, even if for the local elections in the same year they won only 3 mayories in the whole country and managed to get only 0.9% of votes.²³

And it can happen quite the reverse if populists are already in the power. It is hard to name Trump as a Republican if to look at his rhetoric. The rigid two-party system means that, rather than a populist threat from the outside, politicians with populist ideals infiltrate the two major parties. Donald Trump's presidency illustrates this on the right as also the fact that he leads a populist radical-right movement. The pandemic concurrently feeds an "infodemic" - an "overabundance" of information that makes it "difficult for people to identify truthful and trustworthy sources from false or misleading ones," calls for preventive actions like "social distancing" have failed to accrue compliance in many places around the world.[26] Much of this falsehood was fueled by ex-president Trump. After he denied that he lost elections, his representatives and allies have alleged fraud in several key states, 95 lawsuits being filled in 14 states and the District of Columbia. At an institutional level, Trump's claims have made little headway; electoral authorities and courts, including Republicans, have rejected allegations of fraud. Additionally, demonstrations took place, leading to clashed between supporters of the different candidates. The culmination of social and

²³ See Digi24, 2020 parliamentary elections, final results: PSD - 28.9%; NLP - 25%; USR PLUS - 15%, AUR 9%. PMP and Pro Romania do not enter the Parliament, 9 December 2020, <https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-parlamentare-2020/alegeri-parlamentare-2020-rezultate-finale-psd-289-pnl-25-usr-plus-15-aur-98-pmp-si-pro-romania-nu-intra-in-parlament-1415280>. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

political tensions in the aftermath of the presidential elections was the storming and brief occupation of the Capitol building by a pro Trump supporters on January 6, 2020, where the joint session of Congress to count the vote of the Electoral College and certify Joe Biden's victory was ongoing.

Since, the populist leader encourages the people to acclaim them and elect them, the most archetypal form of political participation in Trump's movement is the rally - a form of acclamation. Victimization is an essential element of the Trump's populist discourse as it emphasizes the innocence and the purity of the people (and their leader), claiming that they are the victims of a corrupt system and the "fake news media". In 2020 campaign, Trump campaign concentrated much on an "inner enemy", his rhetoric of victimization being also illustrated by the construction of the figure of an enemy who is no longer a foreign outsider but fellow Americans. The expression "enemy of the people" is not new as it has its origins in the Roman Republic, used during the French Revolution and there is a certain irony in Trump using a term made particularly popular by the Soviet Union while comparing the suppression by the media to what happens in a communists countries. Populist rhetoric helped him in 2016 and it could help him in 2020 to win the election, if not the mismanagement of pandemic, which can be considered the main cause why he was not reelected.

In the Republic of Moldova, during the election campaign, populism and fake news increased due to the COVID-19 virus. Unfortunately, all candidates involved in the campaign used a populist discourse; external aid was a central element to enhance their image and to emphasize the political vector promoted by the candidates. The government, which was subordinated to ex-President Igor Dodon, organized the reception of humanitarian aid, offered by Romania as a support package in order to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanied by 42 specialists, under a bridge on the outskirts of Moldovan capital, which were considered as an act of humiliation and aroused a wave of criticism, especially from citizens with double citizenship (Moldovan and Romania) and unionist candidates. This topic of discussion was used in the campaign to promote their unionist values and visions.²⁴ However, Dodon, organized the military marching band for receiving an aid coming from the Russian Federation, much smaller than the one from Romania.²⁵ Dodon repeatedly violated COVID-19 precautionary measures imposed by his own government. As a reason to retaliate against his opponents and harshly criticize the Western model of COVID-19 management, Dodon was trying to give the impression that the situation in the Republic of Moldova is not so bad, compared to other states with a much bigger population. The figures related to humanitarian aid were also used by the PAS candidate Maia Sandu, who tried to assume as her own merit any aid coming from the West, thus showing her negotiating skills and her value in front of Western politicians.

4.6. The role of alternative voting methods and early voting

Facing challenges imposed by pandemics, states have opted for different approaches. Some countries have decided in favour of in-person elections despite the practical difficulties. Other countries have relied, partly or exclusively, on remote voting methods, such as postal voting or

²⁴ See Vitalie Călugăreanu, Brotherly help offered under the bridge on the periphery of the city, Deutsche Welle, 7 May 2020.

²⁵ Dodon, also promoted the Russian vaccine, which was promises by the Russian officials as an aid for the Republic of Moldova. Through these actions, he tried to prove that he is able to get the country out of the crisis deeply affected by the pandemic. When the situation got out of control, Igor Dodon declared live on Youtube, that this virus is not so dangerous but a simple cold. He was harshly criticized by his opponents, but also by Internet users.

electronical voting. The need for elections to be postponed is much weaker where there are already the provision of postal voting and/or remote electronic voting. These are obvious workarounds for pandemics, which could be expanded.

Despite having a very large Diaspora, voters from the Republic of Moldova could only exercise in-person voting. Although several international organizations suggested Moldovan authorities to consider electronic voting or postal voting to minimize the risk of COVID-19 infection, Moldovan authorities ignored these recommendations. The lack of such alternative methods created for Moldovan voters living abroad a lot of difficulties in exercising their right to vote as many of them live very far from the polling station. Some of them traveled hundreds of miles to vote and stay for more than seven hours in the queue to cast their ballots.

In Romania, in September 2020, the Parliament adopted a number of changes to several election-related laws.²⁶ The OSCE SEAM, who was invited and accredited to observe the elections, noted that these changes were adopted “in a rushed manner and without public debate, contrary to international commitments and good practice”.^[25] The changes included an extension of the application period for postal voting by 30 days, out-of-country voting to two days, and it decreased the number of signatures required to register as a candidate by half, allowing for the possibility to submit these electronically. Expert Forum, a local CSO coalition which observed the elections, raised concerns regarding the timeliness of the changes.²⁷ Voters living abroad could vote in person over the course of two days at 748 polling stations in 92 countries. Eligible voters had the opportunity to vote in person on Election Day or were able to request the use of a mobile ballot box. Postal voting has been used as an alternative method for those living abroad. Although, the electronic voting system was proposed by several politicians, but until now it has not been implemented. The Electoral Permanent Authority (AEP) informed voters in a timely manner about the registration or non-registration of postal votes. Voters whose ballot papers were not received by the deadline were able to vote at the polling stations. Although, 35.880 special ballot envelopes were issued, only 21.600 were received back, which caused a huge media scandal, politicians accusing each other for disappearance of 14.220 envelopes that have never returned.²⁸ Such problems also existed in previous elections campaigns. The public statements of some political leaders and several articles in the media, although lacking conclusive evidence, have raised suspicions about the correctness of the organization of postal voting.

In South Korea, the country’s NEC enacted measures to allow confirmed COVID-19 cases and suspected patients under monitoring to cast their votes. For these voters, the NEC facilitated special voting, upon receipt of applications, between March 24 and 28, and 22.8% of voters submitting the application to vote in this manner.^[17] In addition, in a two-day early voting, which was conducted

²⁶ Amendments were introduced to the Law on Parliamentary Elections Act of 2015, the Law on the financing of political parties and election campaigns of 2006, and the Law on voting by correspondence of 2015. Paragraph 5.8 of 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document states that “legislation, adopted as a result of a public procedure, as well as regulations will be published, this being a condition for their applicability. These texts will be accessible to all. ” See Section II.2.b of the 2002 Venice Commission Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters.

²⁷ See for details Expert Forum, Final report on the observation of the parliamentary elections December 5-6, 2020, 17 January 2020.

²⁸ See Digi24, Irregularities in voting by mail. Thousands of votes of Romanians in the diaspora were not registered, 5 December 2020, <https://www.digi24.ro/alegeri-parlamentare-2020/nereguli-la-votul-prin-corespondenta-mii-de-voturi-ale-romanilor-din-diaspora-nu-au-fost-inregistrate-explicatiile-sefului-aep-1412642>. Accessed on 25 January 2021.

at 3,500 polling stations about 12 million (26.6%) people voted on both days making a record high since the country adopted early voting system in 2013.²⁹

The 2020 US presidential election saw a large rise in postal voting and expanded provisions with regards to early voting, allowing voters to choose from a wide array of options to cast their vote. Citing public safety, political parties, state officials, and non-profits all encouraged residents to use the new mail-in system to vote. There were concerns that election officials would be overwhelmed by a deluge of ballots delivered close to Election Day and that the US Postal Service would fail to deliver these ballots. Several arrangements and requirements regarding voter registration and voting procedures and methods were extended. Absentee or mail-in ballots arrangements were also extended, and in some states the deadline by which the ballots were to be received by election officials was up to a week after Election Day. Some states offered the option for curbside voting due to COVID-19.³⁰ Almost every voting site during the early voting and on Election Day provided electors the opportunity to cast their vote in a vehicle outside the polling station and some sites also provide a walk-up area. In some states, voters who live in a nursing home, assisted living facility, residential treatment center, group home, battered women's shelter or, be hospitalized or unable to go to the polling place due to incapacitating health reasons or a disability were able to apply for agent delivery. Over 22 % of the voters voted early, an increase in comparison with 2016, when nearly 17 % voted early.[10] The use of postal voting saw a large increase as well, from just over 17% in 2016 to over 41% in 2020.[10]

5. Conclusions

Elections are key element for a democracy, enabling citizens to hold governments accountable for their actions and vital for citizens to voice their concerns and choose representatives. Since the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, countries have faced unprecedented pressure regarding whether to hold or postpone scheduled elections, resulting in controversies in either case. South Korea proved that elections can be held safely and successfully even during pandemic. The 2020 elections were held as scheduled, not only because its government was confident of its capabilities to bring the outbreak under control, but also because it was accomplished. Of course, the elections held in South Korea is difficult to replicate. An obvious and important requirement would be that the level of pandemic outbreak must be somehow contained. In Romania, the US, and the Republic of Moldova, when elections were hold, the pandemic was not contained, which worsen COVID-19 crisis. Unless voting is conducted entirely through remote voting methods, it would be unconceivable to run an election while the country is in lockdown and/or with high number of cases.

One the biggest problem in holding safe election when country, such as the Republic of Moldova, has no alternative methods for voting. Online voting has never faced a situation as favorable as today. Amid the current COVID-19 pandemic, online voting is increasingly becoming the most logical solution for all types of elections, however, not many democracies have put in place such option. Online voting is not a panacea that can solve all internal problems of political parties,

²⁹ The purpose of the early voting arrangement was to grant those who cannot vote on the voting day to do so and reduce the crowding at the polling stations on the polling day.

³⁰ Curbside voters must sign an affidavit affirming that they are unable to enter the voting station. People were eligible to use curbside voting when they were unable to enter the polling station due to age or physical or mental disability, if they had a medical condition that puts them at increased risk of COVID-19, were unable to wear a mask due to a medical condition, or if they were experiencing symptoms of COVID-19.

however, in extraordinary situations and/or for countries with large diaspora, it may support country transformation into more democratic and digitalized, giving opportunity for all citizens, especially abroad to exercise their constitutional right.

Another important condition for holding elections during pandemic is to have a solid electoral framework in place. It is very difficult to pull off all the exceptional measures so timely and seamlessly, therefore, each country shall have numerous legal and procedural provisions to facilitate inclusion and participation of voters as a part of the electoral framework. It could be seen the example of Romania, being criticized for doing this not in a timely manner and according procedure as many questioned the integrity of the election.

Although, the US has a necessary electoral framework and alternative voting methods, allowing voters to choose from a wide array of options to cast their vote, a divided approach in how to hold and election campaign during pandemic had a disastrous effect. As millions of Americans turned out to vote, the nation was facing a rapidly escalating pandemic that was concentrated in some of the very states seen as critical in determining the outcome of the presidential race. The fragmented nature of the 2020 elections demonstrated that it is difficult to craft a consistent US-wide response to exogenous shocks to the electoral process. While Biden's campaign has adopted a cautious approach and has endorsed COVID-19 mitigation strategies like social distancing and wearing a mask; Trump has pointedly opposed several of these restrictions, claiming they are politically motivated.

While there is much to learn from the experience of the Republic of Korea and numerous successful aspects to be considered, not all countries, states and territories will be equally well positioned and able to adhere to the standards and approaches needed to ensure credible, safe and fair elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic. South Korea's unprecedented experience in running a national election under the outbreak of a global pandemic can serve as a model, offering important lessons to be learned by all countries in how to safely uphold the democratic right of their people, having a solidary response from all involved political actors and voters. The coronavirus pandemic is a reminder of the unexpected risks involved in running an election at the global scale. It is difficult but not impossible to run an election at a time like during COVID-19 pandemic, and contingency planning is the best hope of keeping the electoral "show" on the road.

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