

Coronavirus in the 'Disunited States of America'

The potential of the ongoing pandemic to accelerate already existing or underlying trends has become particularly visible ahead of the Presidential election in the United States. The coronavirus crisis has boosted environmental factors that can increase radicalisation, while at the same time intensifying the spread of conspiracy theories that can have a similar effect. The accelerated 'truth decay' and the partisan polarisation of the debate about the handling of the continued surge in Covid-19 cases and deaths will likely further undermine trust in institutions, while accelerated societal anxiety could increase the potential for post-election tension.

Background: Increasing polarisation of the US political landscape

Political scientists have voiced concern over growing rifts between liberals and conservatives for decades. Some academics identify Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980s as the [beginning](#) of 'a period of increasing differentiation between the two major political parties'. There is concern that growing polarisation could lead to [violent extremism](#), with social media and group membership accelerating the spread of extremist ideology. US President Donald Trump, who arguably [thrives](#) on polarisation, has further fuelled divisions, including over race relations, police violence and postal voting. In 2019, the Pew Research Center [found](#) that 'the level of division and animosity – including negative sentiments among partisans toward the members of the opposing party – has only deepened'. At the same time, the economic and social fallout of the pandemic has further intensified environmental factors that can fuel radicalisation, including poverty, uncertainty and isolation. According to a United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate [trends alert](#) from July 2020, extreme right-wing terrorist groups and individuals, including in the US, 'have sought to co-opt the pandemic, using some of those conspiracy theories to attempt to radicalise, recruit, and inspire plots and attacks'. They use both physical and online recruitment tools, with the latter benefiting from the increase in time spent online during lockdowns.

'Conspiratainment': Hooked on conspiracy theories

In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) labelled conspiracy theories as potential domestic terrorism threats. The FBI specifically singled out QAnon, a meta-conspiracy theory propagated by anonymous poster 'Q', which provides an [umbrella narrative](#) for a wide spectrum of related sub-conspiracy theories. It alleges that a 'deep-state' network, run by global elites, business leaders and celebrities who worship the devil and engage in paedophilia, is trying to undermine President Trump (who himself has reportedly retweeted accounts promoting QAnon [at least 200 times](#)). Experts liken QAnon to a [cult](#) or even [religion](#), with some calling it as addictive as an alternative-reality game. QAnon-affiliated groups used major online platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to spread content, until both platforms [banned](#) the QAnon-linked accounts in October 2020, following a similar Twitter ban in April 2020. During the pandemic, [QAnon supporters](#) have claimed that the virus is a plot, a hoax and/or a Chinese bio-weapon. According to the Pew Research Center, Americans are split on [QAnon](#) along party lines: 41 % of Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents saw it as a 'somewhat or very good' thing for the country, 48 % perceived it as 'somewhat or very bad'. Only 6 % of Democratic-leaning respondents thought it was 'good', while 90 % saw it as 'somewhat or very bad'. This, in combination with radically differing media diets, contributes to diverging perceptions of reality along party lines. A number of pro-QAnon lawmakers are [expected](#) to be elected to the House of Representatives this year.

Coronavirus deepens already existing rifts

As the numbers of deaths, new infections and hospitalisations keep climbing across the country, with the US among the hardest hit countries [worldwide](#), the rift between Republicans, who urge that schools and workplaces reopen, and Democrats, who are concerned about the administration's response to the outbreak, is growing. This split, reflected in a 31 July 2020 Congress [hearing](#), is also evident in public opinion. While 82 % of Biden supporters said that the coronavirus would be very important to their vote in

October 2020, only 24 % of Trump supporters expressed the same opinion, according to a Pew [survey](#). The survey also identified splits between racial and ethnic groups: 82 % of black registered voters and 63 % of Hispanic voters saw the outbreak as a very important issue to their vote, while only 49 % of white voters said the same. The outbreak in the US appears to have disproportionately [affected](#) people of colour compared with the white population. For example, the Covid-19 infection and death rates for black people are more than 1.5 times higher than their share of the population.

Face masks as 'the ultimate symbol' of the rift between the candidates

Against this backdrop, masks – as the [Washington Post](#) has noted – 'have become the ultimate symbol of the divide between the candidates, with Joe Biden wearing one seemingly at every turn and President Trump mocking him for it'. This divide was also apparent in the 24 October presidential [debate](#), during which President Trump urged the US to reopen, claiming that, 'We're learning to live with [the coronavirus]', while Joe Biden responded: 'Come on. We're dying with it', and did not rule out more lockdowns. President Trump has consistently played down the severity of the virus, claiming it is a [hoax](#) by Democrats to harm him. As the outbreak reached new records ahead of the election, he ridiculed the focus on Covid-19 and accused Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, Dr Anthony Fauci (who frequently contradicts Donald Trump's claims), of being a '[Democrat](#)'.

Actions and words stoking tensions

President Trump's actions – including his campaign rallies gathering thousands of people, many without masks – have been [criticised](#) for worsening the pandemic, rolling back environmental and public-health regulations and undermining science. His words also appear to have stoked tensions. Donald Trump has actively [promoted conspiracy theories](#), [declined](#) to condemn QAnon and white-supremacist groups (while attacking far-left Antifa protesters who are often the subject of far-right conspiracy theories), and even encouraged civil disobedience in the face of lockdown measures. In April 2020, he openly endorsed anti-lockdown protests, [tweeting](#) 'LIBERATE MICHIGAN' and urging his supporters to protest against Democrat governors in key swing states (governors are responsible for lockdown measures). After the FBI foiled a far-right militia group plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer over her Covid-19 restrictions, President Trump reacted by [criticising](#) the lockdown in Michigan, accusing Whitmer of doing 'a terrible job', urging her to 'open up your state, open up your schools, and open up your churches!' At the same time, President Trump has [utilised](#) his own recovery to present himself as a strongman who has defeated the virus, in addition to promoting experimental treatments and playing down Covid-19's risks and effects.

Outlook: Immediate and implicit risks of divisions and violence

According to law enforcement officials, this year's election preparations are '[unusually extensive](#)', amid concern that high levels of 'anxiety and toxicity', further spurred by voter suppression and the sitting President's alleged attempts to [pre-emptively delegitimise the election](#), could lead to violence. An October 2020 [Homeland Threat Assessment](#) published by the US Department of Homeland Security assessed that 'Ideologies driven by DVEs [Domestic Violent Extremists] often are reinforced by a variety of online content, including conspiracy theories and political commentary they view as controversial'. The document specifies that 'Current events that DVEs perceive as infringing on their worldviews often contribute to periods of increased ideologically motivated violence, including recently during the Covid-19 pandemic and nationwide lawful protests'.

Playing into the hands of authoritarian state actors

The Director of the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness [warned](#) in September 2020 that VDEs pose a threat to the 2020 Presidential election, citing a 'witches' brew' of growing political tensions, civil unrest and foreign disinformation campaigns. This volatile situation, in the former beacon of liberal democracy, plays into the hands of malign foreign actors. Experts on foreign interference and disinformation have consistently warned that malign foreign powers, including Russia, Iran and China, use such issues to amplify already existing divisions – including by exploiting potential '[post-election outrage by provoking violence](#)'. These countries' regimes have a clear interest in creating the impression of Western liberal democratic decline and that democratic electoral systems cannot be trusted (a message Donald Trump has consistently propagated), and that there is no good alternative to autocracy.

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