



COVID-19 Has Democratic Lessons to Teach. Has Angela Merkel Helped Germany to Learn Them?

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The coronavirus pandemic is teaching us that democratic health matters for public health. And vice-versa. It is painfully clear in the United States that conspiratorial thinking, political distrust, and lack of federal coordination have rendered an effective response to the coronavirus nearly impossible.

But some world leaders have clearly understood the dangers and opportunities presented for democracy by the pandemic. One of them is German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

In mid-September, we published a policy report analyzing the COVID-19 health messaging of nine democracies worldwide, from Senegal to Sweden. Merkel stands out for her frequent and explicit descriptions of the pandemic as a challenge for democracy. It is worth asking why.

Tomorrow, on October 3, Germany will celebrate the 30th anniversary of reunification. On that date in 1990, the East German communist state was dissolved and incorporated into the democratic West. Merkel grew up in East Germany, starting her political career during the heady days of reunification. She can recall a time before democracy and warns about taking it for granted.

This history has made Merkel one of only a few leaders during the pandemic to take seriously the twin crises of public health and democracy. She has used her scientific background to speak clearly about the virus (she holds a PhD in quantum chemistry). But she has also relied upon her biography to clarify the political meaning of the pandemic.

Implementing coronavirus mitigation measures this spring, she referred to her own life under communism to clarify that she was not doing so lightly. “For someone like me,” she explained, “for whom freedoms of movement and travel were hard-won rights, such restrictions are warranted only when absolutely necessary. In a democracy, they should be enacted only temporarily—and never recklessly.”

From the very beginning, Merkel has acknowledged that the coronavirus has been an “imposition on democracy.” Her September video podcast focused on defending democratic values at a time of crisis. She has repeatedly stressed that democratic principles guide her government’s coronavirus actions: transparency, expertise, communication, and the dignity of individual life.

Germany has managed the economic and public health impacts of the pandemic fairly well. The country implemented extensive testing and contact-tracing measures and offered rapid economic relief for businesses and the self-employed. Schools have reopened. Total deaths from the coronavirus pandemic have not yet

exceeded 10,000.

Germans have overwhelmingly lined up behind the government's response—to the tune of 88 percent, according to one poll. Other studies even found a desire for stricter regulations. Only 10 percent of the public rejects the pandemic measures as excessive.

But the pandemic has also heightened concerns about the state of German democracy. This has been a topic of real concern since 2017, when the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) became the largest opposition party in parliament. In August, 38,000 people protested coronavirus measures in Berlin. Alarming, a few nearly succeeded in storming the Reichstag, an eerie echo of the violent 1930s. Coronavirus restrictions have been seized upon by a wide range of illiberal forces, from neo-Nazis to conspiracy theorists and anti-vaxxers.

No wonder that a key question throughout Merkel's chancellorship has been how to sustain democracy when more and more Germans can no longer remember the dire alternatives. In July 2018, Merkel warned that as the "contemporary witnesses" of Nazism were lost, citizens would have to prove "whether or not we have truly learned from history." This is a problem for all democracies, not just Germany. A recent study reported that one in four young Americans believe the Holocaust to be a myth.

We found in our research that effective COVID-19 communications take into account how the pandemic will be remembered in years to come. Will this be recalled as a moment when democracy worked, when citizens came together to shape their own future and protect their health? Or will it be seen as a crisis that gave license to more authoritarian leadership?

In a country haunted by historical memory, Merkel has done her best to frame the coronavirus as a problem that will be solved by democratic citizens ruling themselves. "We are not doomed," she has reminded her fellow citizens, "to passively accept the spread of this virus." Alongside clear scientific information, she has communicated a sense of shared democratic purpose.

"We are a democracy," she has argued. "We live not by coercion, but by shared knowledge and collaboration. This is a historic task that we will only overcome together."

Three decades after reunification, Germany is resilient enough to confront a pandemic when it comes to intensive-care beds or personal protective equipment. The civic challenges posed by the virus, however, remain serious.

Inspired by her personal experience and the country's past, Merkel has framed the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity for democratic action, not just a frightening crisis. Her communications have been effective. The rest remains up to the people.

This article is part of our "Mapping the Post-Pandemic World" series, to read other pieces in our coronavirus series click [HERE](#).

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