

Bold economic intervention shouldn't require a pandemic

It turns out the government *can* take big action to help people.

From the Editors in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue



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The coronavirus pandemic has brought great suffering to the world. In the US alone, tens of thousands have died, many more have suffered harrowing illness, and even those who are healthy face a plunging economy and widespread unemployment. COVID-19 has demonstrated the startling shortcomings of American governance in the face of emergency.

Yet the crisis has also revealed something cautiously hopeful: a rare glimpse of the big steps our political system, frayed though it is, is capable of taking to support people in economic distress.

Our divided, polarized government quickly enacted trillions of dollars in economic stimulus and relief. It established a loan program, with generous terms, to protect payroll. It greatly expanded unemployment insurance. Yes, these provisions came larded with money for rich individuals and big companies. Still, these are big, aggressive moves to help people at all income levels—the sort of moves we’re all accustomed to hearing politicians say that government simply cannot make. It turns out it can.

Public policies that protect people from economic ruin are often framed as ways to alleviate the suffering of the most vulnerable. But they do more than this: they assist efforts to build strong communities of mutuality and resilience, in which the risks of economic life are mitigated and shared. This matters to all of us, because ultimately all of us are vulnerable. COVID-19 isn’t affecting all Americans equally (see [“The coronavirus pandemic's unequal burden on African Americans”](#)), but it is affecting all Americans. The same is true of the pandemic’s economic repercussions. And much like a stay-at-home order, any government effort to ease economic pain draws on an American sense of social solidarity that, however strained, still remains. It’s an effort that represents the social body’s recognition of its members in dire need.

Such need is always present, of course, if not always at the current scale. The pandemic has created urgent situations for some people; for others, that urgency is nothing new. Our economic system leaves many people out, and our social safety net is inadequate. So if our government can take such bold corrective steps now, why can’t it do so all the time?

During a crisis like this one, it’s clear that suffering is not the fault of the sufferers. Later, in the aftermath, that clarity tends to fade from lawmakers’ vision; it becomes convenient to blame people for their own problems instead. But perhaps the US can do better this time. Perhaps there is an opportunity to begin to build a stronger system of protections—one that takes seriously the precarious position of so many Americans even before the pandemic and the way the entire community is diminished by the suffering of some of its members.

Democracy is fundamentally about a shared stake, in governance and in life. The pandemic is showing us our interdependence and our mutual vulnerability. We’ll need social solidarity in order to beat the virus, and we’ll need it to get through the economic crisis. We’ll keep needing it after that as well.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Help we all need.”