

How a Pandemic Malaise Is Shaping American Politics

Four years later, the shadow of the pandemic continues to play a profound role in voters' pessimism and distrust amid a presidential rematch.



By Lisa Lerer, Jennifer Medina and Reid J. Epstein

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In March 2020, when Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Donald J. Trump competed for the White House for the first time, American life became almost unrecognizable. A deadly virus and a public health lockdown remade daily routines with startling speed, leaving little time for the country to prepare.

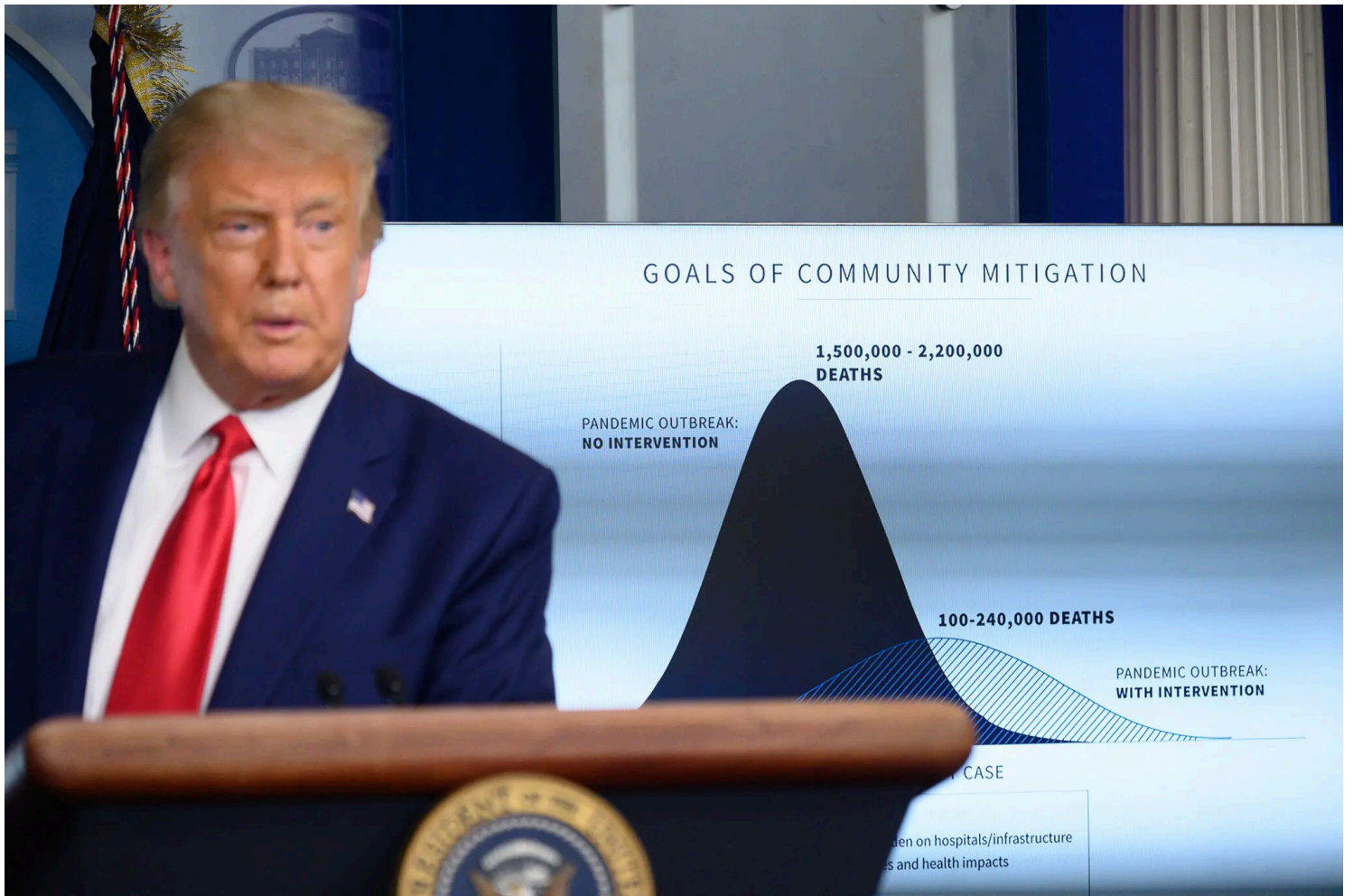
Four years later, the coronavirus pandemic has largely receded from public attention and receives little discussion on the campaign trail. And yet, as the same two men run once again, Covid-19 quietly endures as a social and political force. Though diminished, the pandemic has become the background music of the presidential campaign trail, shaping how voters feel about the nation, the government and their politics.

Public confidence in institutions — the presidency, public schools, the criminal justice system, the news media, Congress — slumped in surveys in the aftermath of the pandemic and has yet to recover. The pandemic hardened voter distrust in government, a sentiment Mr. Trump and his allies are using to their advantage. Fears of political violence, even civil war, are at record highs, and rankings of the nation's happiness at record lows. And views of the nation's economy and confidence in the future remain bleak, even as the country has defied expectations of a recession.

“The pandemic pulled the rug from people — you were never quite as secure as you were,” Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York, a Democrat, said in an interview. “We’re starting to get our grounding back. But I think it’s just hard for people to feel good again.”

High rates of office vacancies have crippled urban downtowns, adding to the sense that the country has yet to recover fully. Depression and anxiety rates remain stubbornly high, particularly among young adults. Students remain behind in math and reading, part of the continued fallout from school closures. And even positive news has been met with skepticism: F.B.I. data released this month confirmed that crime declined significantly in 2023, though polling conducted at the end of last year has shown that voters believe otherwise.

Elected officials, strategists, historians and sociologists say the lasting effects of the pandemic are visible today in the debates over inflation, education, public health, college debt, crime and trust in American democracy itself. The lingering trauma from that time, they said, is contributing to a sense of national malaise that voters express in polling and focus groups — a kind of pandemic hangover that appears to be hurting Mr. Biden and helping Mr. Trump in their presidential rematch.



Former President Donald J. Trump oversaw the most acute phase of the pandemic, but he casts himself as having presided over a more prosperous and secure country. Erin Scott for The New York Times



Voters give President Biden only limited credit for his actions steering the country out of the crisis. Jose A. Alvarado Jr. for The New York Times

Mr. Biden's administration passed a robust package of legislation and issued executive actions that steered the country out of the crisis, but voters give the president limited credit for his accomplishments and remain pessimistic about the economy and the nation's direction. Mr. Trump oversaw the most acute phase of the pandemic, but he casts himself as having presided over a more prosperous and secure country, and continues to lead Mr. Biden in polls.

Philip D. Zelikow, the lawyer who served as the executive director of the commission that investigated the Sept. 11 terror attacks, said the Biden administration moved too quickly to put the pandemic behind it.

"Since the Biden administration never conducted an investigation of the crisis," Mr. Zelikow said, "and also the Biden administration never developed a serious package of reforms to react to the crisis, the administration basically left the impression that it accepted that the government had failed, but just didn't want to talk about it anymore."

Mr. Zelikow, who describes himself as a political independent and says he opposes Mr. Trump, led a nonpartisan team of more than 30 experts called the Covid Crisis Group that investigated the pandemic response and published its findings in a book, "Lessons From the Covid War." He said that the federal government's failure to explain how the pandemic happened had accelerated distrust in institutions, and that such an erosion would most likely benefit Mr. Trump, who argues — often falsely — that American politics and government are "rigged" systems.

"If someone like Donald Trump is elected this fall," Mr. Zelikow said, "the government performance in the Covid crisis will be a significant cause."

Everywhere and nowhere

Many Americans, of all political persuasions, do not want to revisit that difficult and deadly period. Ryan Hagen, who runs an oral history project documenting the pandemic at Columbia University, said it became difficult to get the participants in his study to continue speaking to the researchers as the crisis wound down.

“The pandemic is everywhere in general in this election and nowhere specific, because it sets the conditions under which this campaign is unfolding,” he said. “Even though hardly any of us talk about it, we are all living in its shadows.”

Mr. Biden has defended his role in pulling the country out of a moment of profound calamity, using his State of the Union address to cast the pandemic as “the greatest comeback story never told.”

At a recent Dallas fund-raiser, the president blamed his predecessor for everything people remember with horror about the pandemic.

“Covid had come to America, and Trump was president,” Mr. Biden told donors, adding, “There was a ventilator shortage. Mobile morgues were being set up. Over — over a million people died. Our loved ones were dying all alone, and they couldn’t even say goodbye to them.”

Biden aides said the campaign was aware of declining trust in government and of increasing isolation. Much of their outreach is focused on reaching voters through family, friends or influencers, rather than through the president or traditional political surrogates.

“Our campaign has a major financial advantage,” said Lauren Hitt, a spokeswoman for the Biden campaign, “and that will allow us to spend the next eight months constantly communicating a very simple truth: Joe Biden delivers where Trump failed, from the pandemic to building an economy that works for everyone to protecting our fundamental rights and freedoms.”

The Trump administration took critical steps, like invoking the Defense Production Act, to accelerate the development of the vaccines that allowed American life to begin to reclaim some semblance of normalcy. But Mr. Trump discusses the pandemic only infrequently. When he does, it is often to blame China for causing it, or the virus for ruining what he reminds audiences was a strong economy. Only Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the independent candidate who attracted a following with his outspoken skepticism of vaccines and his promotion of conspiracy theories, continues to raise the virus frequently as a candidate, often to make allegations of government corruption.

“Americans know Biden has been a disaster and they were far better off under President Trump, which is why President Trump continues to crush Biden in the polls,” said Karoline Leavitt, a Trump campaign spokeswoman.

Bipartisan frustrations

Any political discussion of the crisis is complicated by the widely different ways Americans experienced the most globally disruptive event in a generation.

There is no single unifying pandemic narrative. In California, New York and other Democratic-controlled states, schools and businesses maintained restrictions well into 2021. In Florida, Georgia, South Dakota and other Republican-run states, life resumed some semblance of normalcy far more quickly, even as death tolls mounted.



The National Mall in January 2021, filled with flags representing those who were unable to attend President Biden's inauguration because of the pandemic. Jason Andrew for The New York Times



In his State of the Union address this month, Mr. Biden explained the pandemic as “the greatest comeback story never told.” Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times

Since then, memories have been colored by partisan politics. One study published in *Nature* last year found that people’s recollections of the severity of the pandemic were skewed by the views they later held about vaccines.

“It was the first time in my lifetime that it felt like everything was up for grabs,” said Eric Klinenberg, a professor of sociology at New York University and the author of a new book about the pandemic in New York, “2020: One City, Seven People and the Year Everything Changed.” “Where we’re left today is this emotional experience of feeling like something is off in the country. We’re experiencing long Covid as a social disease.”

Frustrations over Mr. Biden’s handling of the pandemic and the post-pandemic recovery run deep among many Republicans, and even some Democrats.

Kristin Urquiza spoke at the Democratic National Convention in 2020 about her experience watching her father die from complications of Covid. She created a political advocacy group, *Marked by Covid*, and said she supported Mr. Biden in 2020 because she believed he would comfort victims and console families. She feels differently now.

“He broke his promise to care,” Ms. Urquiza said of the president.

Rather than coming out of the pandemic with a renewed sense of hope, the country has become a far less unified place, she said. She has been deeply frustrated that there have been no efforts to create a permanent national memorial for the more than 1.1 million Americans killed by the disease.

“The families I speak to — the ones living with long Covid and those who have lost loved ones — express a profound sense of abandonment,” Ms. Urquiza said.

A loss of trust

For many Republican voters, the pandemic also hardened their belief that government does more harm than good.

Michael Jackson, 47, a waiter in Las Vegas who was out of work for nearly a year, was furious that much of the state did not reopen more quickly. “I think most politicians showed they are completely oblivious to what’s currently happening beyond their office,” Mr. Jackson said.

Dr. Mary Elizabeth Christian, a retired breast-cancer surgeon who lives in Baton Rouge, La., and is part of Ms. Urquiza’s Marked by Covid group, stayed isolated throughout the pandemic and still wears a mask in public. She avoids restaurants and some of her favorite pastimes, like attending gymnastics meets at Louisiana State University, for which she was a longtime season-ticket holder.

Her parents, who were vaccinated, broke their isolation for a dinner to celebrate their 62nd wedding anniversary in July 2021. Within three days, they both tested positive. They died within two days of each other that August.

Dr. Christian said she had lost trust in all levels of a government that she believes failed to protect its most vulnerable citizens.

“I have been a pretty stalwart pro-life Republican, and I can say that I was disappointed by the Republican Party,” said Dr. Christian, who added that she planned to vote for a third-party candidate this November. “I was very disappointed that a party that has a platform to defend life didn’t do what it took to defend the lives of people who were being exposed to Covid.”

Democrats say a continued dissatisfaction with high food prices and other daily concerns is part of the reason Mr. Biden has struggled to get broad recognition for his legislative successes, even as the economy has improved.

“There’s still some instability that is testing the nerves of Americans coming out of the pandemic,” said Gov. Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania, a Democrat. “I think that’s very natural for folks to feel that way, given the trauma of Covid and the havoc it wreaked on people’s lives.”



Kristin Urquiza, who created a political advocacy group called Marked by Covid, visiting a pandemic memorial in Wall Township, N.J., this month. Of Mr. Biden, she said: "He broke his promise to care." Rachel Wisniewski for The New York Times



Dr. Mary Elizabeth Christian, a retired breast-cancer surgeon in Baton Rouge, La., said she had lost trust in all levels of a government that she believes failed to protect its most vulnerable citizens. Emily Kask for The New York Times

Exhaustion

Since taking office, Mr. Biden has won lasting legislative milestones, including a \$1 trillion infrastructure package, a \$1.9 trillion Covid relief package and major investments to combat climate change.

But some of his post-pandemic programs with the biggest influence on people's daily lives have not endured. Congress failed to renew a child tax credit payment that sent families monthly checks. Tens of millions of dollars in grants to assist child-care facilities expired, forcing the closure of some providers. Millions of borrowers who had their student loans paused during the pandemic now have payments due, after the Supreme Court rejected an administration plan to forgive \$430 billion of student debt. The administration is now pursuing a more piecemeal approach to forgiving that debt.

Alida Garcia, a Democratic strategist and mother of twins, said she harbored a "fired-up rage" during the pandemic and felt almost constantly angry "about the lack of support for mothers in particular."

"Now, I am equally, if not more, exhausted than at that time, and it feels like things are getting harder for women," she said.

For others, the anger of those pandemic days has metastasized into a deeper lack of faith in politics.

Julie Fry, a public defender in New Jersey, spent months pushing administrators and politicians in her state to reopen shuttered public schools. Three years later, her young daughters are thriving in school.

But she feels angry and resentful — at politicians from both parties — when she recalls those long months of home-schooling and the mental health toll it took on so many children.

“I feel like Trump was a mess and Biden was a coward about doing what was right for kids,” said Ms. Fry, who describes herself as a staunch liberal. “There were no grown-ups willing to speak up for what kids needed.”

Mostly, though, Ms. Fry is trying to move forward.

“I try not to be bitter,” she said. “I just have to live with the fact that this happened and people who I thought were allies and had the same values failed me and my kids.”

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