

The Debate Around COVID-19 Is Starting to Sound Familiar

The debate over COVID-19, both the virus and the policy response, is starting to feel a lot like another complicated scientific issue: global warming. It only took about a month – lockdowns and stay-at-home orders didn't come into full effect until mid-to-late March at earliest – for us to force a question of public health and medical science into a familiar, tired partisan mold.

Granted, the [majority of Americans](#) may not (yet) see it this way; global warming is certainly a more politically charged issue. But on Twitter and in the media, where narratives are shaped and disseminated, where you fall on lockdowns or hydroxychloroquine is quickly becoming a predictor of who you vote for.

The meta-point, [which I've made before](#), is something like this: the solutions (seemingly) required to fight climate change offend right-leaning political and economic preferences. Some people react by feeling that the problem must have been workshopped, or even invented, to *target* their political preferences. The straw-man argument is that environmentalists want to shut down the capitalist economy. Well, this time, we've gone ahead and *actually* shut down the economy, in an election year no less. Can a climate phenomenon really require the dismantling of capitalism? Can a viral epidemic really demand a policy that will oust Trump from the White House? (These are the wrong questions and assumptions, but there are both right-leaning skeptics and ["never let a crisis go to waste" lefties](#) who frame the questions like this.)

One of the key sentiments of right-leaning skeptics is a feeling that agreed-upon arrangements are suddenly being

upended or altered by unaccountable “experts.” You see this, of course, with the celebration of coal in some quarters, despite the fact that [fracked natural gas](#), not climate policy, dealt a mortal blow to the coal industry. You see it with anti-urban conservatives, who [view New Urbanism as social engineering, but free highways as the natural state of things](#). And you see it now with rumblings of discontent over technocratic-sounding language like “social distancing” or “viral shedding,” and in the reactions to [overzealous governors’ orders](#) and predictions that life as we knew it before COVID-19 is over.

However, there’s an ironic flip-flop here, compared to global warming: the skeptic rallying cry on that issue is that “science is never settled.” Yet, the folks on the “right” side of the coronavirus debate are arguing the exact opposite: Trump and an odd French doc say hydroxychloroquine works, Stanford says the fatality rate is like the flu, so give everyone the wonder drug and let’s get back to work already!

I exaggerate. But we are nowhere near the point where we can begin to talk about a scientific or medical consensus around COVID-19. This is simply one of those problems that is, which is immune, so to speak, to our opinions and preferences. America has been affluent and lucky for most of our national life, and perhaps in our age of hyperpartisanship we’ve lost the ability to see problems any other way. Perhaps, some of us still believe that [“we create our own reality.”](#)

Worse than skepticism and contrarianism, some of which is needed, is that the constantly changing and sometimes contradictory data on COVID is starting to trigger the conspiracy theory impulse. Instead of giving the doctors, scientists, and public health experts room to iterate, revise, learn by doing, make mistakes and correct them – to frankly tell us, as [Jim Geraghty at NRO put it, “we’re not sure”](#) – many of us seem to be treating this more like a trial: “You or your model said X last week, today you said Y. When were you

lying? What are you covering up?"

As someone who's both a conservative and who earned a master's degree in public policy, I understand both the frustration with the expert class and the absolute need for experts in a time like this. This is not to say that politics has no place here. But the science must come first, and for the whole country's sake, we can only hope it is settled soon.

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