



## The Quarantine Quandary - How Corona Is Testing Old Moral Philosophies

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This opinion piece provides a comparative analysis of policies responding to the Corona pandemic from two generations with European and Asian roots. We propose broad principles for balancing health and economics while we are gradually recovering from this pandemic. What can we learn from different values and policies in Korea, Germany, and the UK? Where are moral philosophies clashing in the United States today? And which principles should guide our future policies?

The United States has been resilient and decisive in overcoming major challenges over the past century, including the Great Depression, two World Wars, and the more recent Global Financial Crisis. Today's pandemic represents the largest public health emergency since the Spanish Flu struck in 1918, and we only have three months of data to learn from the experience in Asia and Europe. Our comparative analysis is focusing on three democracies: Korea, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

### Which strategies have worked well and which differences have emerged?

These three countries called national emergencies, restricted travel, and enforced social distancing with some success. All are high-income OECD democracies with strong health-care traditions, modest smoking rates, and older populations. But outcomes have been very different with much better results in Korea and Germany:

	Korea	Germany	UK	USA
Population (million)	51	84	68	331
Median-Age	42	47	41	38
Smoker (%)	27	30	19	17
Health/GDP (%)	7	11	10	17
Beds/1000 people	12	8	3	3
ICU beds/100K	20	33	6	30
<b>CASES</b>	10,500	122,000	74,000	500,000
CASES/million	202	1,460	1,109	1,519
TESTS	500,000	1,320,000	320,000	2,530,000
TESTS/million	9,619	15,797	4,796	7,686
DEATHS	208	2,800	9,000	18,600
DEATHS/CASES (%)	2.0	2.3	12.2	3.7

**Sources:** Johns Hopkins, Worldometers, World Bank (10. April 2020)

Korea has been among the [most successful countries](#) in containing this pandemic. Korea's early testing strategies have helped to contain the spread of COVID-19, effectively preventing a major outbreak. Korea quickly completed 500,000 tests and has implemented a wide variety of security protocols to track, detect and quarantine potentially infected individuals. A 2015 outbreak of Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) taught Koreans the significant positive impact that large-scale testing and tracking can have on disease prevention and containment. **Confucian values** in Korea emphasize benefits to society and demand sacrifices to individual liberties, including tracking and quarantining. Legislators have since enacted laws to allow the government access to private information, such as mobile phone or credit card data, to trace the paths of infected individuals and those they may have come in contact with. Taiwan and Singapore have also been successful in early containment.

Germany has been heavily affected with over 120,000 COVID-19 cases so far. Having a more liberal culture, tracing and containment have not been successful in Germany. However, Germany quickly ramped up widespread testing and scaled up capacity in its well-organized healthcare system. German **idealist values** emphasize sanctity of life and demand government action to protect the weaker population, and have quickly established political consensus on strict social distancing and quarantines. [Trust in Germany's government](#) and Chancellor Angela Merkel's approval ratings have soared largely due to her calm leadership and her team's rational decision-making. The public trust and political consensus helped to implement strict social distancing rules while a massive recovery program has been implemented to support businesses. Austria and Denmark have also been successful with early decisive policies and are now considering a roadmap for gradual re-opening of their economies. Germany wants to condition re-openings on widespread antibody testing and being able to track and quarantine at least 80% of individuals potentially infected within 24 hours of contact.

The **United Kingdom** has, somewhat shockingly, experienced the highest death rates, five times higher than those observed in Germany and Korea. **Utilitarian values** in the UK emphasize cost efficiency but politicians realized that they could not reasonably achieve [herd immunity](#) and belatedly started their mitigation strategies, weeks after studies from [Imperial College](#) had raised the alarm. The decision by the British government to initially allow the disease to spread naturally in hopes of establishing herd immunity has proven disastrous and its repercussions are still felt throughout the fragmented British healthcare system as nurses and doctors struggle to manage the overwhelming number of new cases. Sweden and the Netherlands have also started with softer policies and are now suffering much higher death rates than anticipated.

These early examples illustrate that **policy and values** matter in responding to public health crises. Several Asian economies succeeded in early containment by limiting individual rights and enforcing tracking. Germany managed to reduce death rates through early testing and effective policies based on political consensus. To many Americans, such strategies may seem to be invasions of privacy and personal liberties. But as the rapidly changing climate and increase in deforestation continue to bring the animal kingdom closer to our own, worldwide pandemics may become a more common occurrence, forcing us to adapt our legislation and limit some of our personal freedoms to ensure health and safety for us and those around us.

## Where are moral philosophies clashing in the United States today?

US politics has become polarized with [three main factions](#) each coinciding with a different school of thought: **liberals** are promoting Rawlsian policies, **conservatives** are encouraging utilitarianist viewpoints, and **libertarians** are emphasizing individual rights. These three factions are clashing on public health policies, which is illustrated by political proponents and their related philosophies:

Senator Elizabeth Warren represents the **liberal** faction, advocating for a public health system as common good, seeking to protect the vulnerable in the tradition of John Rawls, also emphasizing the sanctity of life. Fairness and the norms of society are balanced with individual rights. She speaks of solidarity and inclusiveness of public health policies and advocates for health insurance as a basic human right.

Senator Marco Rubio is a **conservative** pro-business politician who has been supported by the Tea Party for his **utilitarian** views and advocacy for limited government. His neoconservative views attribute blame on China and support market solutions with temporary assistance programs that encourage a quick reopening of businesses. He wants to repeal the Affordable Care Act and limit regulations on public health care.

Senator Rand Paul represents the **libertarian** faction, promoting individual rights that are guaranteed in the Constitution without any infringement. He has adamantly rejected any public health care option, has openly defied recommendations of public health officials, and is aligned with evangelicals who refuse giving up their personal liberties rather than protecting the vulnerable people in their communities.

The **US Supreme Court** warned in a [landmark decision in 1905](#) against oppressive public health regulation but decided that vaccination mandates were valid to protect the common good of public health. It acknowledged individual rights and liberties but emphasized the state's police powers, and compared mandatory vaccinations with quarantines of ships arriving at American ports with cases of yellow fever aboard. The delicate balance between **public health and constitutional law** is being debated again today by these three political factions with strongly opposing views.

However, political consensus has emerged during the recent pandemic, as evidenced by the US Senate's unanimous support of the CARES recovery program with a huge price tag of \$2.2 trillion. While Democrats based their support on "**public health**" imperatives, Republicans framed their support as defending our "**national security**". Americans are coming together again, just as after September 11, but by now more than twice as many New Yorkers have been killed by this pandemic than on 9/11. Despite the high polarization of US politics, the national security threat posed by the virus has united politicians on both sides of the aisle, but the debate on reopening the economy has just begun. Our politicians must now unite with joint perspectives from science and business, from urban and rural communities, and from communal and individual values to ensure success in addressing the enormous challenges ahead.

## Which principles should guide our future policies?

The United States must not be inspired by extreme policies in authoritarian regimes that disrespect individual liberties, nor by libertarian regimes that undermine public health, nor by misguided utilitarian dogmas that establish herd immunity at any price. Moreover, the United States must not seek scapegoats in international organizations that are essential in fighting this pandemic and in collaborating to develop an effective vaccine. Character is truly revealed during crises and this pandemic represents an opportunity to come together with following principles:

First, we must mobilize all the resources and tools to protect lives by not overloading our health-care system. “Flattening the curve” is reducing death rates but is also extending the initial phase of this pandemic. Health must come first.

Second, we must collaborate on a global scale to develop a vaccine within twelve months, which is the only viable solution to this pandemic. The vulnerable population must stay protected during this process through comprehensive social distancing.

Third, we must treasure political consensus while aiming for a gradual re-opening where our speed remains constrained by the ability to ensure widespread testing, rapid tracing, and enforced quarantines during subsequent waves. Business can start faster when liberties are temporary constrained to public health imperatives.

It might be optimistic to expect a gradual opening of businesses in June and to plan for school openings in September. But it is still unrealistic to envisage airline travel or mega events return to normal this year, as we are preparing for subsequent waves.

Through it all, we must remember that the only way in which we can possibly hope to make it through this crisis successfully is to remain united, to collaborate as a community, and to set our own individual interests aside for the greater good.

PS: Beyond our national security challenge on public health, our debt has exploded, our election is threatened by cyber-warfare, our infrastructure is crumbling, and our environment is disintegrating. How can Boomers leave such a mess for Generation Z?

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