

The Institutional Crisis and COVID-19

by George Friedman - December 7, 2020

In “The Storm Before the Calm,” I wrote of two crises coming to a head in the 2020s: a socio-economic crisis and an institutional crisis. The latter has hit us like a hurricane.

There is a distrust of American institutions that crosses ideological lines. A quarter of voters, including half of Republican voters, believe the election was stolen from Donald Trump. In 2016, there was a widespread belief that Russian meddling helped Trump win the election. Other parts of the theory held that Trump had made a deal with the Russians or was being blackmailed by them. This seems to derive from claims by the losers and so was dismissed by the other side. But they argue the same thing: that democratic institutions are corrupt and are not to be trusted.

Most interesting is the symmetry. The claims regarding Trump and the Russians had their origins in the Democratic National Committee hack and the Steele dossier, and then expanded outward. Many Democrats still think that the claims are true. The current claims regarding the stolen 2020 election originated with Trump himself and will likely be accepted by Republicans for a long time. For all I know, one or both claims are correct. What is certain is that the public finds it possible to readily believe the most extreme claims.

This is what an institutional crisis looks like. The most extreme claims of corruption become readily embraced by one faction and condemned by another. The belief that the presidency is corrupt becomes the framework of political life.

This goes beyond the political. I have written about the crisis of expertise, of experts who know their own field brilliantly but cannot comprehend the consequences of their actions beyond that field. The American government after World War II was built on the sanctity of expertise. That principle has since come under challenge in many areas, where the myopia of the experts undermined its depth.

The COVID-19 pandemic drove the point home. There were those who invoked the authority of medical experts as paramount. There were those who argued that, absent a cure, the solution the experts submitted – masks and social distancing – was only marginally effective and ignored the devastating economic and social consequences of the solution. There was no clear institutional authority that could strike a reasonable balance.

The institutional crisis inevitably generated a political one. The political system split between those who accepted the rigors of the medical solution and those who were unwilling to pay the price for the medical solution. One faction saw the threat of the virus as cataclysmic. Others saw the short-term cure as worse than the disease. The first side demonized the second, the second began to see a deliberate assault by federal institutions on individual liberty. Politicians naturally jumped on one side or the other, thereby intensifying the mutual hostility between factions, and made this an overriding political issue.

Perhaps the most interesting point of the institutional crisis are vaccines. In a limited sense, vaccines are not trusted, especially among well-educated groups hostile to what they see as unnatural remedies. With COVID-19, that has become a much larger and broader array of distrust. The traditional right-left division dissolves here. What exists are those of all ideologies who are eager for a vaccine and those of all ideologies who will refuse to take it. Skepticism of the government's integrity and competence had been a Republican issue since the New Deal, even as the party became more powerful. Support for government utility had been a Democratic position, even as it lost control of that government. Now a movement that professes a new but not yet clear ideology has emerged, and its primary position is that the institutions that govern can't be trusted. In other words, we are seeing the emergence of an anti-institutional movement that does not map to traditional politics. And it emerges at the heart of the current institutional model: the assumption that expertise defines what ought to be done.

The last institutional shift occurred during the Great Depression. It concerned the role the federal government should play in the American economy. The current shift raises the question of the very competence of the federal government in solving problems that go beyond the scope of any one area of expertise. Just as the Depression transformed the political system, so too will this crisis. What is clear is that COVID-19 has raised the question of institutional competence sooner and with more anger than I expected. The division now is the competence of experts in one field to make decisions that involve many. Along with it is the failure of the politicians to referee this issue, choosing instead to exploit it by either worshiping experts or treating them with contempt.

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