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THE NEW VIRAL ORDER

POLITICAL SCENARIOS
IN THE GLOBAL CRISIS

*NOTES FROM A CONVERSATION WITH:
FELIPE A. NOGUERA*

THE INSTITUTE

FOR STRATEGY AND DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH





The Institute's mission relies on encouraging debate of relevant topics among different audiences. We strive to have enriching discussions with experts that pertain to our research subjects. The goal of our ISDR Conversation Series includes sharing experiences among Latin American countries and offering insights that could be useful for students and members of academia, journalists, researchers, and decision-makers alike.

Our first lecturer, Mr. Felipe A. Noguera, is an expert in developing effective strategies in the face of populism, specializing in the subject since 1998. He has also done political polling and consultancy in more than 50 presidential elections in more than 20 countries since 1982. He was the first president of ALACOP (Association of Latin American Political Consultants) from 1996 to 1998, and the first Latin American President of the IAPC (International Association of Political Consultants) from 2011 to 2013.

He majored in Mathematics and graduated with honors from Balliol College, University of Oxford. His postgraduate studies include Economics and Sociology at the Torcuato di Tella University in Argentina. Mr. Noguera was recognized as an "Eisenhower Fellow" for researching public policy and presidential campaigns in the United States.

This document offers notes and highlights from the conversation for easy access and further analysis. The conversation took place through a platform for remote meetings and allowed for free discussion among the lecturer and other guests. The participant's opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.



10 key takeaways

1. Virality is the theme.
2. Misunderstanding and abusing statistics is common.
3. The “new normality” is already here.
4. Viral communication fills the information void.
5. Delivering correct information kills rumors and protects institutions.
6. Causes are contagious, and populism is the consequence.
7. New information overwhelms our traditional system.
8. There is a common populist agenda.
9. There is irrationality in not taking people’s emotions into account.
10. The business class has been oblivious to these scenarios and feels paralyzed.

1. Viralization is the theme.

Even before global health crises, this term had been around and refers to how information quickly spread among different publics, especially using social networks. It is a useful central idea for studying how politicians, media-figures, and experts try to expand on the impression of crumbling institutions or an unavoidable disaster. Viral messages come in many kinds, for example, imitation between governments for dealing with the pandemic, or the behavior of citizens when reacting to using masks in public. There is an expansion of the “never-before-seen” rhetoric, where actors use a language that makes it seem like this a kind of unseen situation. Politicians rely on this kind of communication to get people to abandon their frames and models for analysis. The situation creates a haze where the public might not make out what is happening when, in reality, the crisis tends to deepen problems that existed before. Those describing the pandemic use war analogies but do not treat the crisis like a war. Analyzing these phenomena, possible courses for communication and action emerge for companies and other kinds of organizations.

2. Misunderstanding and abusing statistics is common.

Citizens and public figures alike have a complicated approach to data. For governments, the use of incorrect information leads to wrong decisions. Models and assumptions made at the beginning of the crisis changed periodically as new data emerged. Under these circumstances, the media pressured scientists and public officials to make predictions about the pandemic to which they could be held accountable. Confusion arose among the public about the meaning of these numbers, generally in the domain of epidemiologists and statisticians. The widespread loss of lives is tragic; however, medical information about one person does not constitute information about the pandemic as a whole. Considerations must be made for terms such as prevalence studies, false positives, and false negatives, the margin of error, among others.

3. The “new normality” is already here.

Each country uses different monickers for the crisis and its final stages. The supposed return to



normality, whatever its implications are, should not distract from previous broader trends, such as the protection of institutions from the effects of populism. The analysis must come from recognizing this reality, without waiting for government or others to react. There is no need to wait until the crisis is over.

4. Viral communication fills the information void.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the discussion of the subject used broad generalizations with some disorder. Public officials gave daily press-conferences to address what they felt was an information vacuum. Their messages were not always helpful. Again, the data should be looked at to generate a useful discussion, absent due to the public's anguish at the situation. Different meanings and implications appear for words like pandemic, quarantine, and reactivation and easing, through social media. Recall the famous 1944 study, "A Psychology of Rumour", by Robert H. Knapp, where he poured over one thousand rumors published in newspapers during World War II. Knapp classified them in three categories: pipe dreams (positive affirmations about desired outcomes), bogies (feared states), and wedge-driving (those seeking to disturb the loyalty of groups). They have a psychological effect on the population and reflect their biases. In any situation, the negative ones are more prominent because they fill the space left behind by wrong or non-existing information.

5. Delivering correct information kills rumors and protects institutions.

Reactivation is underway, and there is an excellent opportunity for actors to work with useful and accurate data. A common aspect of populist regimes is the manipulation of data for creating new realities. Think of Argentina in 2007 when the authorities intervened in the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) and reported underestimated inflation rates. In Mexico, the President is fond of saying, "I have other data." Citizens could help with not leaving all treatment of information in the hands of the government. A proven exercise has been generating metrics about the return to activities, like the number of jobs to be recovered if some particular health protocols are obeyed. Useful data can take advantage of viral means of communication to have implications for public policy and empowering organizations.

6. Causes are contagious, and populism is the consequence.

Authoritarianism remains a temptation and feeds on the support of the discontented. The pandemic accelerates the rates at which governments might slip into populism. Leaders that characterize as populists relish crises because they allow for pointing fingers at supposed enemies. It provides for their consolidation of power. The current health crisis is even better for them: the enemy is invisible. Disgruntled citizens feel left behind by the system; they form a tide of rage and exclusion. The populist thinks they can ride and overcome it without ever thinking that it might crush them. The causes for populism come from the lack of equilibrium between direct democracy (delegative) and the republic (institutions). The former concentrates on short-term impulses, the will of the majority, voting, reacting to the news on TV or social media. The latter reflects the system of rights of individuals and minorities, checks and balances, the long-term view of issues.



7. New information overwhelms our traditional system.

Thinking about democracy as a kind of software is apt. Every day, new data and attitudes need to be processed by the system, but it is overwhelmed. Politicians overpromise outcomes and are successful in the short-term. Around the world, the discussion centers on the balance of powers, be it El Salvador, or the United States. During the pandemic in Argentina, for example, the National Congress and the Judicial Branch were suspended for health reasons, but the executive cabinet was allowed to hold meetings. Democracies that call themselves strong for trying to shake themselves from the hold of institutions are the ones that could fall into populism; this is an exacerbated tendency.

8. There is a common populist agenda.

The themes that prop up populist leaders can be seen behind the way they act during the pandemic. They focus on: the building of power; gaining an electoral edge; trying to control communication and narratives; doing things that were unthinkable in the national context; deciding among allies and enemies and crony capitalism; implementing constitutional reforms; exerting influence over the legislative and judicial branches; expanding occupation of public space; being always in campaign mode and restricting others from doing the same. Governments of this kind ignore the channels between them and institutions, organizations, markets, by thinking of democracy only as a direct link with citizens. When plans turn out different from expected, they point to certain actors and institutions as enemies.

9. There is irrationality in not taking people's emotions into account.

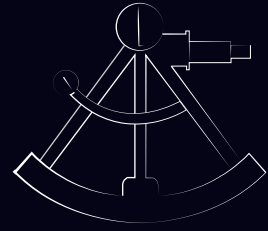
Studies from the realm of behavioral science help to understand confirmation biases or attitudes that the population possesses, even from before the crises. There are rational models for dealing with populism; however, they fail when the approach does not factor-in emotions. When generating correct alternative data, recognizing this helps build better narratives that could release the public from the populist government's hold. It does not mean confronting the government but instead creating alternatives for getting through the crisis.

10. The business class has been oblivious to these scenarios and feels paralyzed.

It is natural for business people to think in terms of profits and loss. Still, a helpful mnemonic could be "EBITDA vs. EVITA," the former referring to President Juan Domingo Perón's wife and populist figure, for taking these social phenomena into account. Organizations and leaders must act in the present by having incidence in the public arena, working for containment where incidence is difficult, and innovating to counteract the tide of disgruntlement. People should not forget that the struggle between populism and institutions is the backdrop of the health crisis.

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