

Alex Schein:

"In These Times" is what a handy turn of phrase in 2020, with varying adjectives used to modify it. Difficult, unique, strange. What started as a useful shorthand for the COVID-19 pandemic, became used to describe worldwide protests and calls for racial justice. This Fall, the OMNIA Podcast goes beyond the shorthand. Using COVID-19 as a platform for a six episode series that explores the science, social science, and history that has shaped events in 2020. In These Times, knowledge is more important than ever.

Today we talk to a political scientist, a historian, and an environmental humanist about the other urgent issues of our time, and examine how they affect and are affected by COVID-19. This is episode three, Crisis Upon Crisis.

Speaker 1:

What do you make of the president's handling so far, of the coronavirus?

Speaker 2:

I remember the swine flu, the bird flu, Y2K, and all of those things were so hyped up in the media and they turned out to be what he refers to as a nothing burger. So I think this is also going to be a big nothing burger.

Speaker 3:

If we can slow the spread, we can buy days. And when we buy those days, that means that we can get ventilators and we can get beds, and kits, and masks, and tests. And this will save lives.

Protesters:

USA. USA. USA.

Speaker 5:

We don't want your shut down anymore.

Speaker 6:

It's a little shocking to see so many people not wearing protective masks, not staying six feet apart.

Alex Schein:

Since the early days of the pandemic in the U.S, our approach has been affected by politics. Democrats and Republicans have each taken stance on the best way to react that extend even to how they interpret the emerging science. Political science professor, Matthew Levendusky studies political polarization.

Matthew Levendusky:

I think for a lot of people the first time, it popped into the broader discourse was around the 2000 election, which for those who remember it, it was so close, and it had that stark red blue map, where aside from the area of the old industrial Heartland. It was basically the coast were Democratic in the middle of the country was more Republican. And so that generated a lot of interest around trying to understand these issues. So it's something that I've been working on now for a long time. And so I think

for political scientists, we tend to think that the elites are quite divided. And so when we say elites, we basically just mean elected officials who make decisions. So when we look at the positions that, say Nancy Pelosi and Joe Biden and Chuck Schumer on the one hand, and Mitch McConnell and Ted Cruz and Donald Trump on the other hand take, they're quite distinct.

Alex Schein:

Professor Levendusky, who is also Penny and Robert A. Fox Director of Fels Institute of Government at Penn, says that the increased polarization has its roots in the 1950s and 60s when the parties realigned. Now people's political alignment has become so intense that it influences how they view the coronavirus and the measures taken to deal with it.

Matthew Levendusky:

So one of the things that political scientists always like to think about with regards to these issues, is that ordinary people take their cues from political elites. And so I don't mean that people are stupid and they don't think for themselves. But on an issue you don't know a lot about, like say what to do about a pandemic, you look at people who you kind of trust to give you information. And so if you're a Democrat, those people are likely to be Democrats. If you're a Republican, those people are likely to be Republicans. And so you could imagine a very different world, and this is what happened in a lot of other countries where all the national leaders would have gathered, the president, vice-president key leaders in the house and Senate. In January, when they began getting reports that this virus was spreading. And said, "Okay, we need to band together, we need a national strategy, we're going to come together as one and do this. It's not going to be a political issue. We're going to figure out how to solve this together."

Alex Schein:

But the divide among regular citizens is not as large as it might seem.

Matthew Levendusky:

But that said, I think it's also important to note that there are gaps between Democrats and Republicans and how they view the pandemic. What kinds of protective behavior they're engaging in. Absolutely. But there's two points to note there. One is that they're somewhat smaller than you might think. And that for a lot of people, they don't necessarily view this through a partisan lens. Journalists, scientists, politicians, we tend to see the world through an extremely political lens because that's our focus, that's what we think about. We sometimes make a mistake in that ordinary people just aren't as politically wrapped up as we are.

Alex Schein:

The people who are most polarized in their approach to the pandemic also tend to be those who view the world through a strong political lens. And these are the people we hear most about.

Matthew Levendusky:

Why do we hear so much about those people? Well, one of the things we also know from a lot of scholarship and political science and communications is that those people are the loudest voices in the room. So those are the people we see on Twitter or on Facebook or Instagram, kind of filling up our feeds with all kinds of things. Either saying you're a horrible person if you don't wear a mask or you're a sheep if you wear a mask. Or these are the sorts of people who have very strong opinions and love to go

to rallies and speak to reporters. And journalists like to cover those people because they're exciting and their statements will be full of conflict. If you interview someone and they say "Well I really see both sides. I think there's reasonable arguments. I'm going to wear a mask by, I think we should also be thoughtful about how we approach the problem." That's not a super interesting story. It's much more interesting to have something where the issue is framed and much more kind of stark conflict driven terms.

Alex Schein:

Levendusky thinks about how, when he was a kid, people got their news from only a few sources, the major television networks, radio, and local newspapers. For people who like news, there's never been a better time, but that abundance comes with some side effects.

Matthew Levendusky:

You can read a thousand news websites. You can look at Twitter, you can look at Facebook, you can subscribe to podcasts. You can watch MSNBC, CNN, Fox news. You can get Aljazeera English. You can get so many different types of news. But at the same time, if you don't like news, you don't really have to get it. So how's any given outlet going to compete for your attention? Well, they've got to make the story really interesting. So one way they can do that is they can kind of play up its most sensationalistic elements and they can play up the most novel elements of it to kind of keep you coming back. That means they tend to kind of over-hype certain types of things and kind of want to give the most compelling version of a story.

Alex Schein:

In the time of COVID-19, the media we consume has a big impact on our understanding of the virus and its effects.

Matthew Levendusky:

I've been doing some survey work this spring, and we're seeing each time we go back to folks more and more people have either had themselves, know someone who's had it, know someone who's been very sick from it as the pandemic kind of spreads. But for most people with this, or with most other topics, you don't necessarily have a personal experience with it. So you are depended on the media to kind of cover this. And so the way in which they choose to frame the story, is going to change the way that people interpret this.

Speaker 7:

You are in violation of my (beep) constitutional right.

Speaker 8:

Across the country, tense moments caught on camera as more businesses enforce new rules to stop the spread of the virus. This customer at a Miami Beach Publix went on an explicit rant after being denied entrance for not wearing a mask.

Speaker 9:

I found a (beep) costume.

Alex Schein:

And what about mask wearing? Does that signify where on the political spectrum you fall?

Matthew Levendusky:

For some people, I'm sure it is kind of a political signal, but most people are actually kind of complying with those requests and then they're more or less wearing masks. And so I walk around Philadelphia most days and most of the people I see are wearing a mask. I wish more people would use it to cover their nose, but I think it's better something than nothing. But I think if we look kind of broadly, a lot of the danger that we're seeing now is more coming from people who want to get back to "normal life." They want to be going to restaurants and bars and those things, maybe especially young people. So I think that this is something where, for most people this isn't necessarily a political thing where their political views are driving this. I think maybe part of the issue too, is also political leaders who are trying to let people go back to normalcy, maybe on a speed that's not quite, we're not quite ready for.

Speaker 10:

No justice.

protesters:

No peace.

Speaker 10:

No justice.

protesters:

No peace.

Speaker 10:

No racist.

protesters:

Police.

Speaker 10:

No racist.

protesters:

Police.

Speaker 10:

What was his name?

protesters:

George Floyd.

Alex Schein:

The protests of summer 2020, echo the civil rights protests that took place in the middle of the 20th century. Mary Frances Berry, Geraldine seagull, professor of American social thought and professor of history and Africana studies takes us to that moment in time,.

Mary Frances Berry:

The modern civil rights movement, which we usually talk about starting in the 1950s and sixties and the pressure that was brought to bear through non-violent protest cause the enactment of the civil rights laws. But what caused the protest was the continued racial conflict that existed in the South in particular. Because the movement was in the South at first, until it moved North later. And it was the continued conflict, the segregation that had existed for a long time and the inequality as well as people not having the right to vote and being prohibited from voting, even though the 15th amendment and supposedly to the constitution and made it clear that the right to vote should not be interfered with because of race, previous condition of servitude and national origin. But there were complaints about this. The justice department had received complaints for years from people in the South about police violence, about voting, about all these issues.

Alex Schein:

Protests began in the South, in the mid 1950s and continued through the 1960s.

Mary Frances Berry:

There was a lot of opposition. Some people were killed, some people were put in jail, put in prison. And it grew, the protest grew. And then eventually they asked that the national government passed a new civil rights law. And John Kennedy was president. Didn't take it all seriously at first, he said... And I found this in his papers when I was researching one of the books I did. That "This movement is going to go away. It's not going to last. These things always fizzle out." And he was right most of the time.

And he said, "What!" And Bobby Kennedy agreed with him. But then in Mississippi, James Barrett tried to get into Old Miss and violence broke out there. And the president had to intervene and he made a speech and he took it seriously after that. And eventually he supported a new civil rights bill to be passed. He hoped in 1963. And the March on Washington took place in 1963, August 28th in Washington, DC -- march for jobs and freedom, which Martin Luther King and others spoke at. And it was to give impetus to get another mode of nonviolent protest to give impetus, to passing this legislation.

Alex Schein:

A series of civil rights laws was passed that gave federal protection to voting rights, employment opportunity, and equal housing. But laws are one thing. Actions are another.

Mary Frances Berry:

The law is, as I teach my students, it's one thing to have law written down and get bills fast and all that. But if you don't enforce it, it doesn't make any difference. You might as well not have it. I mean, it's a cautionary tale and it's rhetoric and it's symbolic. And over the years, since that time, when students asked me, if these laws were all passed and I was asked that again yesterday, by my students. If these laws all got passed, why didn't they end discrimination? And why do we still have it? And why are we

still talking about white supremacy and gender discrimination and all these different things, if in fact these laws passed, whatever happened to the laws?

And that's because the executive branch of the government is responsible for seeing that the laws are faithfully executed. The justice department is at the forefront of that and the agencies have some responsibility and depending on who was in office politically. And what their base wanted or didn't want, you would get weak enforcement. As a matter of fact, no one was really willing to go all out.

When Lyndon Johnson was president and the commissioner of education at that time, tried to cut off the money from Chicago public schools because they kept on being segregated. The Chicago politicians get in touch with the president and president told the commissioner of education, "No, you find some other way to do it." Whatever happens. There are provisions that you can cut off contracts, federal contracts, to institutions that discriminate on the basis of sex, race, religion, national origin, or so on. But in the times when that's been attempted, the political forces, no matter who was around, have usually says, no, you're going to end up harming. The argument is that while those provisions are there and they have some make symbolic sense, you will harm the institution for everybody who's there. If you cut off the money.

Alex Schein:

Professor Berry, a former Chair of the U.S Commission on Civil Rights, says that people need to be socialized to want change and the protests need to continue.

Mary Frances Berry:

I think that the way you get change period is by, as the people in the civil rights movement saw, and the people in the gun rights movement are seeing, and the people in the climate change movement are seeing, is the way you get change is by disruption. And by making your voice known and heard. You can vote, but you also need to do all these other things and you have to be persistent and you have to keep it up. If you want to make change. You cannot rely on policies that they don't implement themselves. The constitution doesn't implement itself.

Alex Schein:

Looking at the intersection of racial justice and the coronavirus, Berry has a warning.

Mary Frances Berry:

COVID, the virus -- the real question is, what will we do afterwards? We know that historically what happened after a pandemic, was that people went back to relating to each other, see each other. People like other people. So they like to, they don't like to be isolated. So they started doing community. Again, the law is the word of the day. That racial injustice has been seen during the virus, the pandemic. We've seen enough of that. And we know about the disparities and all that. And the question is, will what happened make us change policies? Will we decide we need national health care?

I don't think so, but it would be a logical conclusion. Well, given the disparities that have occurred here. What will we do about the economy? Is unemployment insurance enough of a protector for people when they're going through an economic crisis caused by something which is beyond their control? All of these questions will be asked after it is over. How long it lasts, will determine whether or not we change direction completely in some way. Or whether we just pick up pretty much, where we left off. Which is what has happened with earlier pandemics.

Alex Schein:

So what's next? That's a question Bethany Wiggin has been pondering.

Bethany Wiggin:

I have been wrestling with that question about whether there will be a new normal for a really long time. And interestingly, the very first group of environmental humanities, student fellows, who we had. They wrote in a manifesto that they found their work in shaping a new normal. That they wanted to really push hard on what it was to be normal. And I've been thinking about that phrase. It's a troubling phrase on so many levels, because you don't want to think that a crisis is normal, but of course the climate crisis is stretching on a warning after warning has been issued by the IPCC, by Al Gore, by any number of brilliant activists, by gratitude for work by the kids, increasingly who are taking leadership on this crisis.

Alex Schein:

Professor Wiggin is an associate professor of German and the founding director of the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities, or PPEH – a research organization that emphasizes collaboration across disciplines, community engagement, and environmental justice.

Bethany Wiggin:

As a parent, as well as a teacher, I've really wrestle with this question of, do we educate our children into an understanding that this is a new normal? Just get used to it. There's going to be more wildfires. There's going to be more extreme weather. There's going to be more pandemic. This is normal. Or do we say "No, this isn't normal. This is a terrible aberration from normality. And therefore it's intendant upon us to work, to create a different role."

Alex Schein:

She sees connections between the way COVID regulations have played out. And the environmental crisis.

Bethany Wiggin:

Recently I've been thinking one intersection has to do with the way that the public health crisis that is presented by COVID impinges upon what many Americans consider to be their freedom of wearing a mask. If you think about shared responsibility for healthy environment, shared responsibility for a healthy public health environment, it curtails the autonomous nature of how Americans have longed to find freedom. What it means to be free in a liberal sense in a philosophically liberal tradition. And I think the climate crisis is like that as well.

I mean, that's why... people hate regulation. They don't want to restrict carbon emissions. Because we're free to do what we want to do. But then both crises have reminded us, of course, that we are not free from our environments. Whether it's considered to be the public health medical environment or the ecological environment. We are products of those environments, but we are also producers of those environments. And so our actions have fast repercussions for other humans, but of course, other species.

Alex Schein:

The stakes are high right now. The future is unknown.

Bethany Wiggin:

There's so much research and anecdotal reporting on young people and older people on climate scientists in particular suffering. It's not clear whether it's post-traumatic stress disorder or pre-traumatic stress disorder actually. But at any rate, a kind of broad array of eco anxieties. I think that will be something that as educators, as citizens of the world, as members of a community of care, we're going to have to deal with those anxieties more and more frequently, whether we deal with them by acknowledging that we're in a crisis or by advocating and working for a new normal, for a green new deal. It's... I think probably all approaches are welcome. They pose a real difficulties I think. Both intellectually, as well as emotionally.

Alex Schein:

Part of PPEHs' work is to get people to recognize climate change in their own lives. Their project, My Climate Story, encourages people to document the changes they've witnessed. Professor Wiggin spoke to us from Maine, where she grew up.

Bethany Wiggin:

Famously the water is very cold. And I told a climate story about how as a child, I could be in the water for short amount of time. And then my lips would turn blue. My parents would help me out of the water. And in the summer of 2019, the water was so warm that we could actually swim for pretty easily a half an hour. I mean, it was still chilly, but it wasn't blue, like you couldn't feel your feet anymore. Those changes are accelerating this summer even further. And it's the summer of 2020 in the waters of the Northern part of the Gulf of Maine.

It's historically been far too cold for great white sharks. And there's been several fatal, great white attacks, very close by actually. And species are migrating. The water is warming at the same time that oceans are acidifying. Oceans are changing really right before our eyes. You can feel it when you're swimming and you see it in the species that are with you in the water. Lobsters are migrating further and further. North friends of mine who are lobster. Men and women are really wondering about how much longer they're going to be able to make their livelihood fishing these grounds.

Alex Schein:

If there is hope here, Professor Wiggin sees it in her students.

Bethany Wiggin:

So students in my classes and the research students who I am so lucky and love to work with and mentor. They really see the climate crisis as part of much wider intersecting set of crises that absolutely and fundamentally have to do with racial inequality with long histories of racialized capitalism. For the students who I work with, they don't see the climate crisis as subject solely to a technical fix. Those are necessary, but they're not enough. They're not sufficient. Because the roots of the problem are so or the problems are so vexed that the students really see a much larger set of questions, larger set of problems whose solutions lie in a real kind of reform of relations with humans and relations with the more than human world as well. And the work that students make and the types of research they find so meaningful really works to promote wider communities of care.

Alex Schein:



This wraps up the third episode in our six part series. In These Times. We'll be back with episode four, Exacerbating Inequality, part one. We'll look at how COVID-19 has shined a spotlight on disparities in the U.S healthcare system. We'll talk with a sociologist and lawyer, a political scientist and a doctoral student, who's writing a history of the cystic fibrosis community.

In These Times as a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to professors, Matthew Levendusky, Mary Frances Berry, and Bethany Wiggin. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

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