

## Why the 2020 Election Makes It Hard to be Optimistic About the Future

*di Paul Krugman*

The 2020 election is over. And the big winners were the coronavirus and, quite possibly, catastrophic climate change.

OK, democracy also won, at least for now. By defeating Donald Trump, Joe Biden pulled us back from the brink of authoritarian rule.

But Trump paid less of a penalty than expected for his deadly failure to deal with Covid-19, and few down-ballot Republicans seem to have paid any penalty at all. As a [headline](#) in The Washington Post put it, “With pandemic raging, Republicans say election results validate their approach.”

And their approach, in case you missed it, has been denial and a refusal to take even the most basic, low-cost precautions — like requiring that people wear masks in public.

The epidemiological consequences of this cynical irresponsibility will be ghastly. I’m not sure how many people realize just how terrible this winter is going to be.

Deaths from Covid-19 tend to run around [three weeks](#) behind new cases; given the [exponential growth](#) in cases since the early fall, which hasn’t slowed at all, this means that we may be looking at a daily death toll in the thousands by the end of the year. And remember, many of those who survive Covid-19 nonetheless suffer permanent health damage.

To be fair, the vaccine news has been very good, and it looks likely that we’ll finally bring the pandemic under control sometime next year. But we could suffer [hundreds of thousands](#) of American deaths, many of them avoidable, before the vaccine is widely distributed.

Awful as the pandemic outlook is, however, what worries me more is what our failed response says about prospects for dealing with a much bigger issue, one that poses an existential threat to civilization: climate change.

As many people have noted, climate change is an inherently difficult problem to tackle — not economically, but politically.

Right-wingers always claim that taking climate seriously would doom the economy, but the truth is that at this point the economics of climate action look remarkably benign. Spectacular progress in renewable energy technology makes it fairly easy to see how the economy can wean itself from fossil fuels. A recent analysis by the [International Monetary Fund](#) suggests that a “green infrastructure push” would, if anything, lead to *faster* economic growth over the next few decades.

But climate action remains very difficult politically given (a) the power of special interests and (b) the indirect link between costs and benefits.

Consider, for example, the problem posed by [methane leaks](#) from fracking wells. Better enforcement to limit these leaks would have huge benefits — but the benefits would be widely distributed across time and space. How do you get people in Texas to accept even a small rise in costs now when the payoff includes, say, a reduced probability of destructive storms a decade from now and half the world away?

This indirectness made many of us pessimistic about the prospects for climate action. But Covid-19 suggests that we weren't pessimistic enough.

After all, the consequences of irresponsible behavior during a pandemic are vastly more obvious and immediate than the costs of climate inaction. Gather a bunch of unmasked people indoors — say, in the Trump White House — and you're likely to see a spike in infections just a few weeks later. This spike will take place in your own neighborhood, quite possibly affecting people you know.

Furthermore, it's a lot easier to discredit Covid deniers than it is to discredit climate-change deniers: All you have to do is point out the many, many times these deniers falsely asserted that the disease was about to go away.

So getting people to act responsibly on the coronavirus should be much easier than getting action on climate change. Yet what we see instead is widespread refusal to acknowledge the risks, accusations that cheap, common-sense rules like wearing masks constitute “tyranny,” and violent threats against public officials.

So what do you think will happen when the Biden administration tries to make climate a priority?

The one mitigating factor about the politics of climate policy I can see is that unlike fighting a pandemic, which is mainly about telling people what they can't do, it should be possible to frame at least some climate action as carrots rather than sticks: investing in a green future and creating new jobs in the process, rather than simply requiring that people accept new limits and pay higher prices.

This is, by the way, possibly the biggest reason to hope that Democrats win those Georgia runoffs. Climate policy really needs to be sold as part of a package that also includes broader investment in infrastructure and job creation — and that just won't happen if Mitch McConnell is still able to blockade legislation.

Obviously we need to keep trying to head off a climate apocalypse — and no, that's not hyperbole. But even though the 2020 election wasn't about climate, it was to some degree about the pandemic — and the results make it hard to be optimistic about the future.