American culture, specifically our disdainful attitude toward expertise and leadership, is not conducive to making improvements to public health policy. Don't expect many changes in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

A few years ago, I gave a talk at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland titled "Science Communication in an Age of Fake News." The focus of the talk was on revealing the high prevalence of junk science, particularly in the media, and ways in which we can counter it.

The attendees were almost exclusively European, which explains why I was asked by one student, "Can't you just ban fake news?" In response, I described why that was not possible in the United States because of the free speech that is guaranteed to all Americans by the First Amendment to the Constitution. In our view, bad speech is defeated by better speech. In much of the rest of the world, bad speech is just banned. For instance, in many European countries, Holocaust denial can land a person in prison.

The cultural divide between Americans and pretty much everyone else in the world is perhaps starkest in Asia. Americans place the greatest emphasis on individual liberty, while Asian societies place the greatest emphasis on collective well-being. (This is partially due to religious and philosophical differences as well. The most influential Asian religions speak of balance and
universal oneness.) That's why Asian societies have little problem implementing restrictive public health policies that Americans would find outrageously and intolerably invasive.

It also explains why the United States likely will never implement the sort of public health reforms that might help prevent subsequent waves of COVID-19 or another pandemic.

**American Culture Will Prevent Useful Public Health Reforms**

Last week, I praised the State of Washington for requiring restaurants to keep customer logs containing names and contact information to facilitate contact tracing if and when there is a second wave of coronavirus infections. But political pressure forced the governor to back off. Now, providing such information is voluntary.

Even non-intrusive, relatively banal technologies like temperature monitoring are controversial. While imperfect, temperature monitoring can identify people with fevers who may be sick. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is opposed.

Anti-vaxxers, of course, are already opposed to the coronavirus vaccine, even though one doesn't exist yet. Conspiracy theories about the virus are rampant. Certain members of our society can't agree on which medications work to prevent or treat COVID-19, and those who present scientific evidence for one side or the other are automatically presumed to have a political agenda. Even wearing a face mask, according to the Associated Press, is "becoming a political statement — a moment to pick sides in a brewing culture war. All of this serves to underscore our dangerous social pathology.

It goes without saying that our collective attitude is not conducive to making productive changes to public health policy. Don't expect any.

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