

● **BREAKING**

GOVERNOR CLOSES SCHOOL FOR 3 WEEKS, BANS GATHERINGS OF 25 OR MORE, BARS ON-SITE CONSUMPTION AT RESTAURANTS

BREAKING: GOVERNOR CLOSES SCHOOL FOR 3 WEEKS, BANS GATHERINGS OF 25 OR MORE, BARS ON-SITE CONSUMPTION AT RESTAURANTS

OPINION

To survive the coronavirus, the United States must tighten up

It's not just about medicine. It's about culture.

By **Michele Gelfand** , Updated March 13, 2020, 10:31 a.m.



A man wearing a hazmat suit and mask mops the floor inside a mosque in Singapore. Tightly controlled societies, like Singapore's, have done a better job of containing the new coronavirus than "loose" societies, like Italy and the United States. ASSOCIATED PRESS

US officials have been implementing a wide range of public health measures to mitigate the damage being wrought by the deadly new coronavirus. While social distancing, better hygiene, and flat-out travel bans may help, we have yet to address one of our biggest vulnerabilities: America's traditionally loose culture. The decentralized, defiant, do-it-your-own-way norms that make our country so entrepreneurial and creative also deepen our danger during the coronavirus crisis. To fight this pandemic, we can't just shift our resources; we have to shift our cultural patterns as well.

Already we can see signs of panic and egocentric behavior. To protect themselves, many Americans are hoarding supplies. Some have even resorted to stealing masks and hand sanitizer from hospitals. We see a disorganized response from state and local governments, delayed and inconsistent reactions from US universities, and until Wednesday — when President Trump banned travel from Europe — a very hands-off approach to an immense collective threat.

These policies reflect a broader cultural phenomenon. In a loose culture like the United States's, people are simply not used to tightly coordinating their social action toward a common goal and, compared with other nations, we're more ambivalent about sacrificing our freedom for strict rules that constrain our choices.

America's disorderly response to the coronavirus reflects our cultural conditioning over the last several hundred years. In a paper my colleagues and I published in [Science](#) several years ago, we classified countries in terms of how much they prioritized rules over freedom. Tight societies, like China, Singapore, and Austria, have many rules and punishments governing social behavior. Citizens in those places are used to a high degree of monitoring aimed at reinforcing good behavior. Loose cultures, in countries such as the United States, Italy, and Brazil, have weaker rules and are much more permissive.

Differences in tightness and looseness aren't random. Countries with the strongest laws and strictest punishments are those with histories of famine, warfare, natural disasters, and, yes, pathogen outbreaks. These disaster-prone nations have learned the hard way over centuries: Tight rules and order save lives. Meanwhile, cultures that have faced few

threats — such as the United States — have the luxury of remaining loose. They understandably prioritize freedom over constraint, and they are highly creative and open, but also more disorganized than their tight counterparts.

This trade-off in order versus openness becomes painfully obvious during the early, exponential spread of a virus, when these cultural differences can have profound effects. Famously “tight” societies like Singapore and Hong Kong, for example, have demonstrated the most effective response to Covid-19. Singapore, as of this writing, has recorded zero deaths from the disease. Meanwhile, the lack of coordination and resistance to rules in looser societies massively compounds the risk of widespread infection.

While the Western media have referred to “Draconian” measures Beijing imposed after the initial Wuhan outbreak, China’s tight cultural programming effectively slowed the spread of the coronavirus. China has put at [least 50 million people under mandatory quarantine](#) and deployed security checks and [infrared thermometers](#) at train stations and grocery stores. It is monitoring its [citizens’ health](#) through smartphones apps like AliPay and WeChat. It’s even taking steps to [disinfect cash](#) with ultraviolet light and high temperatures.

But it’s not just a top-down effort. Concerned about infecting others, Chinese citizens themselves undertook remarkable sacrifices to help mitigate the disease. “They’re mobilized, like in a war, and it’s fear of the virus that was driving them,” said Bruce Aylward, a senior World Health Organization official, in [an interview with The New York Times](#). “They really saw themselves as on the front lines of protecting the rest of China. And the world.”

On the flip side, Italy, a loose culture in our data, took days to coordinate a response. Even after a quarantine was announced, [thousands of people fled parts of northern Italy](#), furthering the virus’s spread. Italians, used to bending the rules, also wonder whether the quarantine [would be enforced](#), causing more confusion.

In the United States, the response to the virus so far echoes our loose programming. It's been conflicting, unstandardized, and uncoordinated. Universities and public schools are only beginning to cancel classes. Testing efforts remain slow, cumbersome, and haphazard. Confused in this chaotic environment, people are tempted to "defect" and focus on their own interests.

In all of the uncertainty, we need to remember that the trajectory of the virus has as much to do with the nature of the coronavirus as it does with culture. Our loose cultural programming needs to do a big switch in the days to come. Across history, tightening in the face of threat helps populations to survive. Our own remarkable unity during World War II shows that we've been able to shift from loose to tight. Now we need to do it again with strong leadership from the top. By temporarily sacrificing liberty for stricter rules, we'll be able to limit the damage from this disease together.

Michele Gelfand, a professor of psychology at the University of Maryland, is the author of "Rule Makers, Rule Breakers: How Tight and Loose Cultures Wire the World."

Have a point of view about this? Write a [letter to the editor](#); we'll publish a select few. (We're experimenting with alternatives to the comment section for creating online conversation at Globe Opinion over the next month; you can let us know what you think of our experiments [here](#).)

©2020 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC