

Chosen Prompt: *How should governments approach democratic values during the coronavirus crisis, and how does this impact you as a high schooler?*

COVID-19: A Global Crisis of Health and Democracy

The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought havoc around the globe. Yet, as an international community, we are sharing a common experience as we battle this powerful force of nature together. Every region's administration, however, is navigating a unique path through this global crisis. While governments should make decisions regarding the virus in line with their national values and existing political frameworks, they must not suppress the free flow of information or violate basic human rights—namely free speech—in the process.

In an aggressive attempt to halt the spread of COVID-19, China's authoritarian government imposed extreme restrictions on its people. In addition to mandating widespread lockdowns, the government infiltrated citizens' privacy with electronic surveillance. Perhaps, in the short term, these invasive measures lowered infection rates. But would such operations be effective in the U.S., a nation that views itself as a beacon of freedom and democracy? No—these autocratic measures would threaten our fundamental democratic institutions. While staying healthy during this crisis is essential, we cannot risk losing the personal freedoms—"life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—we have cherished since our founding.

Although data might suggest that China has handled COVID-19 better than the U.S., a dictatorial approach cannot be sustainable in the long run, especially if the world experiences a resurgence of the virus in future months. To empower citizens to feel a sense of responsibility towards each other and their greater communities, governments must establish open, transparent relationships with their people. Citizens must be able to trust their leaders before they can appreciate and understand their decisions.

Especially dangerous to democracy has been an increase in restrictions surrounding free speech and the media's dissemination of information as countries declare a state of emergency. Around the world—in the Middle East, Africa, and Eurasia—governments have cracked down on free expression—a right so fundamental that it is included in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Vocal Egyptian health workers and journalists have been deemed "national threats" while Chinese leaders routinely censor articles and arrest journalists challenging its response to COVID-19, essentially suspending free speech under the pretense of

blocking “fake news.” During a health crisis, having access to timely, accurate information is crucial. By concealing new research and information regarding the reality of the country’s situation, the Chinese government is putting its people in danger. To make informed decisions, citizens must be fully aware of the risks surrounding them.

In the U.S., however, we still have the liberty to ask questions—even questions that challenge our administration. This is because freedom of expression lives at the core of our democratic system: no freedom could exist in the U.S. in the absence of free speech. While I am not proud of our nation’s response to COVID-19, I am grateful for my ability to vocalize this sentiment without fear for my safety.

As a student, I am especially concerned about the space for free speech at U.S. high schools and college campuses. Historically, through debate, dialogue, and protest, college students have ensured that campuses play key roles in sustaining inclusive dialogues and enriching democracy. As a first-generation American woman with Indian and Italian heritage, I am passionate about pursuing advocacy work in Eurasia, where certain governments—regardless of the existence of a global pandemic—frequently use severe speech restrictions to manipulate public opinion.

As technology and modes of communication rapidly evolve, the limits of what we define as speech are also changing. We are living through a historical period—daily, the definition of democracy is challenged by members of every generation. The rise of movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter, in conjunction with COVID-19, have emphasized the importance of sustaining national and international dialogues while highlighting the intricacies of discrimination and privilege: how do race, class, gender, and age intersect with free speech? COVID-19 has brought these issues into sharp focus as questions mount about governments’ responses to the virus as well as its disparate impact on minorities. Who has the right to challenge their government’s actions or state of inaction?

Democracy is under threat—we must work together to maintain our system of government built by and for the people. Democracy exists so everyone can have a voice—this must remain our reality. COVID-19 has emphasized the need for active, honest communication. As members of a global community, we have much to learn from each other. Every country is combating COVID-19 in a unique manner; some approaches have proven more successful than others. To eradicate this virus worldwide, every government must let its citizens speak truthfully

about mistakes made at home and explore successes abroad. By thoughtfully listening to each other's perspectives as we share our resources while even participating in collective medical innovation, we can engage in a powerful exchange of ideas.