

ACTON INSTITUTE POWERBLOG

# Cooperation vs. coercion amid COVID-19

by JOSEPH SUNDE • April 22, 2020



**A**s the COVID-19 crisis rolls on, many of America's governors have continued to impose, extend or add new restrictions to stay-at-home orders, leading to **increasingly arbitrary** rule-making and **growing criticism** over the prudence and practicality of such measures.

Thankfully, individuals and institutions rely on more than government diktats to guide their behavior. In turn, amid the government overreach and tense ideological debates, civil society appears to be self-governing rather well — marked by plenty of individual restraint, collective wisdom and creative cooperation. To

be sure, we've had our share of **reckless spring-breakers, resistant religious leaders** and **carefree employers**. Yet the bigger story is one of personal responsibility and social innovation. Human cooperation is alive and well, even in a season of heightened coercion and distancing.

As **economist Lyman Stone** explains on **Jonah Goldberg's latest podcast**, people seem to respond more so to *information* about the virus than edicts from government — proceeding to adjust their habits, behaviors and interactions accordingly. Surely, there are businesses who have closed their doors who would not have done so otherwise, but even amid those frustrations, enterprises and institutions quickly adapted, finding new ways to connect and collaborate while still preserving public safety.

“Many businesses closed down well before they were ordered to,” **Goldberg writes**, reflecting on Stone's analysis. “Millions of people practiced social distancing and refused to get on planes not because they were commanded to, but because they were convinced this was a wise course of action for themselves and their loved ones. People change their behavior when they are given clear information about risks.”

While countries have tried a wide range of containment strategies, “what we've seen in every country is that what really does it is information,” Stone says. Indeed, prior to any government lockdowns, we can see a **significant voluntary shift in behavior** in the early weeks of the pandemic.

Yet the vibrancy of civil society isn't limited to its ability to “social distance” freely and prudently. With very little organized initiative or central planning, individuals and institutions also jumped into creative service mode — taking strides to create and operate in new and innovative ways, whether to keep businesses afloat, create in-demand products and services or directly combat the virus itself.

In an [essay at Public Discourse](#), Antony Davies and James Harrigan reflect on this overall trend, noting that, “as we are facing the highest levels of coercion in living memory, we are also seeing a degree of cooperation that is every bit as profound.”

Ironically, even the politicians seem to recognize this power and potential — in their own limited ways and when it serves their own limited purposes. For amid the various state-level cocktails of coercive measures, we have also seen a targeted loosening of *other* regulations, all in an attempt to incentivize support and assistance — *cooperation!* — among enterprises and institutions.

As Davies and Harrigan explain:

*Vice President Mike Pence recently announced that medical professionals will no longer need separate licenses to practice medicine across state lines. This change has the potential to release medical professionals from areas in which the infection rate is lower to work where rates are higher. The underlying and extremely sane message is that, when it comes to caring for the sick, doctors are more expert than government regulators. We would be better off cutting through years of built-up red tape to let them ply their craft as they see fit.*

*Not to be outdone, the Department of Health and Human Services announced that it would waive licensing requirements, thereby permitting physicians to provide telemedicine services across state lines...The Food and Drug Administration has gotten in on the action too, announcing that it is relaxing regulations in order to allow companies producing COVID-19 test kits to bring them to market immediately. By contrast, the process of navigating a new product through FDA testing usually takes months. And it's not just medical regulations that are being relaxed. The Department of Transportation has suspended rules limiting the number of hours truckers can drive per day. With these restrictions lifted, truckers can get needed products to their destinations faster. This will come as welcome news to people looking at empty supermarket shelves.*

It's an encouraging sign, and one that clearly affirms the reality that our capacity for cooperation moves well before and beyond what the government does or does not see — allows or disallows. “While this cooperation is most evident where government relaxes its involvement,” write Davies and Harrigan, “it is most meaningful where government was never involved in the first place.”

“The hallmark of civil society is cooperation, which is what we should all be thinking about at times like these,” they continue. “The coronavirus defines our collective life at present, but cooperation defines our collective life as a rule. Always. When our knee-jerk reaction to immediate problems is to coerce, as is so often the case, we push the obvious solutions to our problems into the background. And still, people cooperate.”

Indeed, in the spaces where barriers never existed, people were already busy realigning their habits and relationships, rethinking business processes, streamlining methods of exchange and adapting supply chains to meet a new set of human needs.

People were already busy *cooperating* to love and serve their neighbors:

*People are offering free babysitting service, sometimes for healthcare professionals, sometimes just generally. People are volunteering to go to grocery stores for the elderly and infirm. People are packaging lunches for students whose only food came from their schools, most of which are now closed. In perhaps the finest PR move of all time, the **Grub Burger Bar** in Atlanta even started offering the hottest commodity in the country, toilet paper, to their customers from their commercial stocks. The price? A shocking \$3 for four rolls.*

*...Walmart hasn't closed its doors. The retail giant has instead cut back to essential products and reassigned workers from less important departments to things people need right now. Amazon has added a hundred thousand or so temporary employees to get much-needed food and supplies to customers all over the country. Just a few months ago, politicians were decrying Amazon and Walmart as exploitive companies and their founders' wealth as something that was undeserved and should be redistributed. Yet, in crisis, Amazon and Walmart have become the lifeblood for American households. They are, to say the least, good corporate citizens. Perhaps most surprisingly, professional sports team owners like Mark Cuban continue to pay their employees even as gate receipts have dropped to zero...*

*As if on cue, grocery stores around the country started reserving their first open hour of the day for the elderly and otherwise immunocompromised. Why the first hour? That's when the stores are cleanest, the shelves are fullest, and the lines are shortest. All of this is happening without a shred of governmental coercion. Left unchecked, this is what "cold-hearted" capitalism leads to, more often than not.*

Here at Acton.org, we have highlighted a number of similar examples, from **medical-device innovation** to **creative service among businesses** to **social and economic action among churches** and **community institutions**.

Through interaction and collaboration with others, we realize our needs and take care of ourselves, but we also meet the needs of others. Through work, we earn daily living, but more importantly, **as we have seen**, we realize our vocation to serve others and build civilization and culture. In the space between the producer and the

consumer, worker and co-worker, the business and the customer, we see a diversity of roles, gifts, and innovations — embodying creativity, wise stewardship, measured risk-taking and creative service for the love of neighbor and the glory of God.

“These are by no means isolated incidents, and they shouldn’t even really be surprising. When times become difficult, people come to help each other as a rule,” write Davies and Harrigan. “...Thankfully, for every governor declaring what people can or cannot do, there are thousands of regular people doing what regular people have always done: cooperating.”



### **JOSEPH SUNDE**

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