SOCRATIC SEMINAR – GOVERNMENT CONTROL
Essential Questions: • **What is government control?**   • **When should a government take any action?**   • **Who decides when a government should restrict what people do?**   • **How should government control be monitored and reviewed?**   • **Why is it important that government control be monitored and reviewed?**
With reference to the attached resource material, as well as your own research, construct a reasoned response on this issue, paying particular attention to the depth, breadth and fair-mindedness of your views.   You are not limited to discussing the essential questions above. You may dig deeper into the issues by asking critical questions to your fellow panelists, or lead the discussion into a specific perspective or angle.

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About this topic
The primary role of the government is to govern. To govern, the state is given the power to take actions on a wide range of matters. For instance, the state has the power to decide which businesses and investments are allowed, who goes to school, at what age, whether drugs, alcohol and cigarettes are contraband items, how employers treat their workers, whether parents have the right to punish their children, and so on.   Some actions that the government takes are seen as necessary intervention and regulation. However, some actions are seen as controlling, an overreach or even repressive.   When does a government action become excessive? On what basis is this decided, and by whom? How should government actions be monitored, reviewed and revoked, should there be a need to do so?   These are issues to ponder when you examine this broad and wide-ranging topic.

Exhibit 1 - What are rules for?

Underlying the discussion is the place of rules in society. This discussion is both philosophical and practical, and one might add, personal. Is having rules a matter of (ideological) preference?

You may also wish to read up on rules-based society and the role of the government in terms of rules and regulations.

Could we live in a world without rules?
By Nick Chater | 22nd February 2020

We might dream of a world where there are no rules, but how practical would it be?

"I'm in my late 20s and I'm feeling more and more constrained by rules. From the endless signs that tell me to 'stand on the right' on escalators or 'skateboarding forbidden' in public places to all those unwritten societal rules such as the expectation that I should settle down, buy a house and have a family. Do we really need all these rules, why should I follow them and what would happen if we all ignored them?" Will, 28, London

We all feel the oppressive presence of rules, both written and unwritten – it's practically a rule of life. Public spaces, organisations, dinner parties, even relationships and casual conversations are rife with regulations and red tape that seemingly are there to dictate our every move. We rail against rules being an affront to our freedom, and argue that they're "there to be broken".

But as a behavioural scientist I believe that it is not really rules, norms and customs in general that are the problem – but the unjustified ones. The tricky and important bit, perhaps, is establishing the difference between the two.

A good place to start is to imagine life in a world without rules. Apart from our bodies following some very strict and complex biological laws, without which we'd all be doomed, the very words I'm writing now follow the rules of English. In Byronic moments of artistic individualism, I might dreamily think of liberating myself from them. But would this new linguistic freedom really do me any good or set my thoughts free?

Some – Lewis Carroll in his poem Jabberwocky, for example – have made a success of a degree of literary anarchy. But on the whole, breaking away from the rules of my language makes me not so much unchained as incoherent.

Byron was a notorious rule breaker in his personal life, but he was also a stickler for rhyme and metre. In his poem, When We Two Parted, for example, Byron writes about forbidden love, a love that broke the rules, but does do so by precisely following some well-established poetic laws. And many would argue it is all the more powerful for it:

In secret we met
In silence I grieve,
That thy heart could forget,
Thy spirit deceive.
If I should meet thee

After long years,
How should I greet thee?--
With silence and tears.

Consider, too, how rules are the essence of sport, games and puzzles – even when their entire purpose is supposedly fun. The rules of chess, say, can trigger a tantrum if I want to "castle" to get out of check, but find that they say I can't; or if I find your pawn getting to my side of the board and turning into a queen, rook, knight or bishop. Similarly, find me a football fan who hasn't at least once raged against the offside rule.

But chess or football without rules wouldn't be chess or football – they would be entirely formless and meaningless activities. Indeed, a game with no rules is no game at all.

Lots of the norms of everyday life perform precisely the same function as the rules of games – telling us what "moves" we can, and can't, make. The conventions of "pleases" and "thank yous" that seem so irksome to young children are indeed arbitrary – but the fact that we have some such conventions, and perhaps critically that we agree what they are, is part of what makes our social interactions run smoothly.

And rules about driving on the left or the right, stopping at red lights, queueing, not littering, picking up our dog's deposits and so on fall into the same category. They are the building blocks of a harmonious society.

Of course, there has long been an appetite among some people for a less formalised society, a society without government, a world where individual freedom takes precedence: an anarchy.

Rules often arise, unbidden, from the needs of mutually agreeable social and economic interactions
The trouble with anarchy, though, is that it is inherently unstable – humans continually, and spontaneously, generate new rules governing behaviour, communication and economic exchange, and they do so as rapidly as old rules are dismantled.

A few decades ago, the generic pronoun in written language was widely assumed to be male: he/him/his. That rule has, quite rightly, largely been overturned. Yet it has also been replaced – not by an absence of rules, but by a different and broader set of rules governing our use of pronouns.

Or let's return to the case of sport. A game may start by kicking a pig's bladder from one end of a village to another, with ill-defined teams, and potentially riotous violence. But it ends up, after a few centuries, with a hugely complex rule book dictating every detail of the game. We even create international governing bodies to oversee them.

Imagine how chaotic chess would be without its carefully defined rules (Credit: Getty Images)
The political economist Elinor Ostrom (who shared the Noble Prize for economics in 2009) observed the same phenomenon of spontaneous rule construction when people had collectively to manage common resources such as common land, fisheries, or water for irrigation.

She found that people collectively construct rules about, say, how many cattle a person can graze, where, and when; who gets how much water, and what should be done when the

resource is limited; who monitors whom, and which rules resolve disputes. These rules aren't just invented by rulers and imposed from the top down – instead, they often arise, unbidden, from the needs of mutually agreeable social and economic interactions.

The urge to overturn stifling, unjust or simply downright pointless rules is entirely justified. But without some rules – and some tendency for us to stick to them – society would slide rapidly into pandemonium. Indeed, many social scientists would see our tendency to create, stick to, and enforce rules as the very foundation of social and economic life.

Despite our protests to the contrary, rules seem hardwired into our DNA. Our relationship with rules does seem to be unique to humans. Of course, many animals behave in highly ritualistic ways – for example, the bizarre and complex courtship dances of different species of bird of paradise – but these patterns are wired into their genes, not invented by past generations of birds. And, while humans establish and maintain rules by punishing rule violations, chimpanzees – our closest relatives – do not. Chimps may retaliate when their food is stolen but, crucially, they don't punish food stealing in general – even if the victim is a close relative.

In humans, rules also take hold early. Experiments show that children, by the age of three, can be taught entirely arbitrary rules for playing a game. Not only that, when a "puppet" (controlled by an experimenter) arrives on the scene and begins to violate the rules, children will criticise the puppet, protesting with comments such as "You are doing that wrong!" They will even attempt to teach the puppet to do better.

Indeed, despite our protests to the contrary, rules seem hardwired into our DNA. In fact, our species' ability to latch onto, and enforce, arbitrary rules is crucial to our success as a species. If each of us had to justify each rule from scratch (why we drive on the left in some countries, and on the right in others; why we say please and thank you), our minds would grind to a halt. Instead, we are able to learn the hugely complex systems of linguistic and social norms without asking too many questions – we simply absorb "the way we do things round here".

But we must be careful – for this way tyranny also lies. Humans have a powerful sense of wanting to enforce, sometimes oppressive, patterns of behaviour – correct spelling, no stranded prepositions, no split infinitives, hats off in church, standing for the national anthem – irrespective of their justification. And while the shift from "this is what we all do" to "this is what we all ought to do" is a well-known ethical fallacy, it is deeply embedded in human psychology.

One danger is that rules can develop their own momentum: people can become so fervent about arbitrary rules of dress, dietary restrictions or the proper treatment of the sacred that they may exact the most extreme punishments to maintain them.

Political ideologues and religious fanatics often mete out such retribution – but so do repressive states, bullying bosses and coercive partners: the rules must be obeyed, just because they are the rules.

Rules, like good policing, rely on our consent

Not only that, but criticising rules or failing to enforce them (not to draw attention to a person wearing inappropriate dress, for example) becomes a transgression requiring punishment itself.

And then there's "rule-creep": rules just keep being added and extended, so that our individual liberty is increasingly curtailed. Planning restrictions, safety regulations and risk assessments can seem to accumulate endlessly and may extend their reach far beyond any initial intention.

Restrictions on renovating ancient buildings can be so stringent that no renovation is feasible and the buildings collapse; environmental assessments for new woodlands can be so severe that tree planting becomes almost impossible; regulations on drug discovery can be so arduous that a potentially valuable medicine is abandoned. The road to hell is not merely paved with good intentions, but edged with rules enforcing those good intentions, whatever the consequences.

Individuals, and societies, face a continual battle over rules – and we must be cautious about their purpose. So, yes, "standing on the right" on an escalator may speed up everyone's commute to work – but be careful of conventions that have no obvious benefit to all, and especially those that discriminate, punish and condemn.

Rules, like good policing, rely on our consent. And those that don't have our consent can become the instruments of tyranny. So perhaps the best advice is mostly to follow rules, but always to ask why.

Exhibit 2 – Singapore: A Case Study

This article appears as part of a course material on constitutional rights from the Constitutional Rights Foundation. It is reproduced with the original discussion questions and learning activity.

Do you think the commentary is fair?

Singapore: Model society or city of fear?

Model Society

After landing at Changi International, you will be impressed with the efficiency of Singapore's airport, called the finest in the world by the travel industry. You will have little trouble getting to your hotel, since Singapore has plenty of taxis, modern expressways, and a sleek new subway. You will soon notice that auto traffic is carefully regulated with well-disciplined drivers.

As you make your way through the city, you will be pleased with the squeaky clean streets lined with trees and flower beds. High rise apartment and office buildings help pack 3 million people into 240 square miles (about 12,000 citizens per square mile). You will not see any slums, homeless people, or beggars.

By the time you arrive at your hotel, you will be aware that almost everyone speaks some English. English is taught as the "first" language in the schools, and has become the common language for everyday communication. You will also learn that eating is a joy in Singapore with its many five-star restaurants. Even the city tap water is safe to drink. At night, you will have little fear as you stroll through Singapore's safe streets.

Singapore is a city as well as a nation, located on a small island in Southeast Asia. A former British colony, Singapore became completely independent in 1965. Today, Singapore is truly a multicultural and multilingual society with four official languages: Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and English. Singaporeans of Chinese descent, speaking a variety of dialects as well as Mandarin, make up more than three-quarters of the population. The Chinese are also the driving force behind the country's highly successful business community. Malays, mostly Muslim, account for the bulk of Singapore's low income workers. Other Singaporeans are Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians from southern India. This great ethnic mix in Singapore heavily influences the way the government runs the country.

The people of Singapore today enjoy the highest standard of living in Asia, second only to the Japanese. The average annual income is about the same as in the United States. The unemployment rate is under 5%. Most people own their homes (mainly comfortable apartments). Workers pay into a social security system that provides health care benefits, allows them to borrow in order to purchase a home, and enables most to retire at 55.

The Government Knows Best

Less than 30 years ago, Singapore was a backwater, poverty-stricken, Third World port city with few natural resources. But soon after they gained independence, the founders of the struggling nation decided to transform their city-nation into a world-class commercial center. The founders accomplished this through careful planning and by attracting investment from foreign multinational corporations.

One of Singapore's most prominent founders, Lee Kuan Yew, flirted with socialism as a young man, but later became a fierce anti-communist and an advocate of free enterprise. Lee and a small group of like-minded leaders set out to plan a model society. He was the guiding force behind Singapore's economic miracle from its beginnings with the new republic in 1965 until he retired as prime minister in 1990.

Lee was convinced that an elite group of highly educated, dedicated, and honest leaders should run the government. Their goal was to assure a political stability that would attract foreign investors. Unlike other totalitarian regimes, Lee installed a system that allowed regular elections and competing political parties. Lee's popular political party, the People's Action Party (PAP), has won almost all the seats in the parliament for more than a quarter of a century.

Prime Minister Lee and the People's Action Party both believed that the government knows what is best for the people of Singapore. As a result, the government has little tolerance for political debate, special interest groups, or dissent. The government expects its citizens to be hardworking, disciplined, and obedient. Most Singaporeans seem to agree.

When Singapore became an independent nation in the mid-1960s, the Vietnam War was raging nearby and the threat of a communist takeover seemed real. Consequently, the government under Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew passed a series of laws to suppress dissent. One of these laws, the Internal Security Act, allows the government to arrest and jail individuals without charge or trial.

Many of Singapore's laws are backed by stiff fines: failing to flush a public toilet ($100); spitting or smoking in public places ($300); eating or drinking on the subway ($300); littering ($600); selling chewing gum ($1600). The government came down against chewing gum after vandals began sticking wads on elevator buttons and subway car doors. Elevators in apartment buildings even have urine detectors that, when activated, take the violator's picture and lock the door until the police arrive. The fine is $1200.

For more serious crimes, Singapore resorts to imprisonment and caning (beating with a stick). The death penalty is used in cases of first degree murder, armed robbery, and drug trafficking. Over 30 persons have been hanged since 1975 for drug offenses.

Singapore's economic system has been described as "state capitalism." While private ownership and free enterprise are vigorously encouraged, the government still keeps a firm hand on most business activity and retains ownership of some industries. The government also controls wages and has weakened the labor unions so that strikes are rare.

The school system is patterned after the Japanese model. Periodic examinations weed out those who do not do well in academic subjects (especially English) and "stream" them into technical and vocational schools. The more academically successful youngsters go to

"superschools" where they are prepared for the university and professional careers.

One of the most controversial government policies concerns population control. At first, the government launched a campaign to reduce the birth rate through tax incentives and easily available abortions ("Stop At Two"). However, after discovering that such a policy would cause Singapore's population to decrease after the year 2030, the government reversed itself. They offered tax rebates for a third child and made abortions more difficult to get ("Go For Three"). Then, when most three-child families turned out to have low incomes, the government became concerned. They enacted new laws that restricted valuable primary school registration to the children of mothers who were college graduates. This policy proved to be so unpopular that it was finally abandoned.

City of Fear

In recent years, some Singaporeans have begun to question the old belief that the government always knows what is best for the people. In 1987, 22 church social workers, professionals, and students publicly criticized certain government policies. They were accused of organizing a "Marxist conspiracy to subvert the existing social and political order." They were jailed without trial. Most of these "criminals" were released after confessing on television. However, several of them were rearrested after they issued a statement to the press retracting their confessions. They also charged that while they were held in jail they had been beaten, subjected to long interrogations, and otherwise mistreated.

Some of those who were rearrested appealed to the courts with habeas corpus petitions. These required the government to produce formal charges or release them. The courts ordered that they be let go, but as soon as they were free the government arrested them again. The last of the "Marxist conspirators" were not released from jail until June of 1990; they are restricted in their freedom of movement, speech, and association with others.

Government censorship is a fact of life in Singapore. The government screens books, magazines, movies, videos, music recordings, live performances, and the internet. Privately owned TV satellite dishes are illegal. All Singapore newspapers are controlled by a single holding company largely owned by the government.

Political gatherings of more than five persons in Singapore require a police permit. Therefore, public demonstrations are rarely allowed except in support of the government. When asked why university students were denied permission to protest against tuition increases, the current prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, replied:

If you allow students to do so, then workers will begin to do so over the slightest grievance. And if you have several demonstrations, right away the impression is created that government is not in control of the situation that the place may become unstable. That will have an impact on foreign investors.

In many ways, Singapore provides its inhabitants with an ideal existence. Singaporeans enjoy a clean, efficient, and attractive environment. Most citizens can expect full employment, a good education, and comprehensive healthcare. This seemingly secure, comfortable society depends on strictly enforced laws that were originally designed to combat communist subversion and prevent conflicts from breaking out among the country's ethnic groups. Singapore's rigid rules and numerous laws make sure that the tiny city state runs smoothly, but at what price to individual freedoms and human rights?

Food for Thought

What aspects of life in Singapore do you like the most? What do you dislike the most?
Why are human rights like freedom of speech and press along with due process of law lacking in Singapore?
What is more important to you: human rights or economic security? Why?

Exhibit 3

During the recent pandemic, a few people felt that the government had infringed on their respective rights by telling them they had to mask-up to protect themselves and others. This article attempts to present their views.

Anti-maskers explain themselves

By Emily Stewartemily.stewart@vox.com | Aug 7, 2020, 7:40am EDT

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At the outset of the pandemic, Amy, a 48-year-old mother of two from Ohio, was afraid. When the government began recommending people wear masks, she not only complied but also made masks for others. "I was like, oh, this is scary, this could be really bad," she said.

But when Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine announced the state would extend its lockdown for the month of May, she'd had it. Pandemic over or not, she was done. After that, Amy became vehemently anti-mask and began to doubt whether the coronavirus was really that big of a deal. Her mother unfollowed her on Facebook over her "anger posts" about masks, and she hasn't heard from her in a month. She carries a homemade mask with her, just in case, but she doesn't believe in them.

"It's a violation of my freedom, I think, and then also I just don't think they work," Amy said. "A lot of stuff says it does, but then some doesn't."

Masks have become an extremely heated point of contention during the Covid-19 outbreak. Viral videos of people having meltdowns over masks are commonplace, and in many parts of the country, it's not abnormal for strangers to confront each other publicly over the issue. A small but vocal segment of the population has dug in and ignored the growing evidence that masks make a difference in combating the coronavirus. For those who believe that at the very least wearing a mask can't hurt, it's hard to not develop some animosity toward those who refuse. The question I keep hearing from pro-mask friends and family is always the same: What are these people thinking?

In recent weeks, I spoke with nearly a dozen people who consider themselves anti-mask to find out just that. What I discovered is that there is certainly a broad spectrum of reasons — some find wearing a mask annoying or just aren't convinced they work, and others have gone down a rabbit hole of conspiracies that often involve vaccines, Big Pharma, YouTube, and Bill Gates. One man told me he wears a mask when he goes to the store to be polite. A woman got kicked out of a Menards store for refusing to wear a mask amid what she calls the "Covid scam garbage."

But there are also many commonalities. Most people I talked to noted government officials' confusing messaging on masks in the pandemic's early days. They insist that they're not

conspiracy theorists and that they don't believe the coronavirus is a hoax, but many also expressed doubts about the growing body of scientific knowledge around the virus, opting for cherry-picked and unverified sources of information found on **social media** rather than traditional news sources. They often said they weren't political but acknowledged they leaned right.

Most claimed not to know anyone who had contracted Covid-19 or died of it, and when I told them I did, the responses were the same: How old were they? Did they have preexisting conditions? They know their position is unpopular, and most spoke on condition of anonymity and will be referred to only by their first names. Amy told me people are "not very nice about this."

The mask debate is complex. As much as it's about science, health, and risk, it's also about empathy. If someone doesn't personally know anyone who died from Covid-19, does it mean those lives don't matter? Are older and immunocompromised people disposable? Does one person's right to ignore public health advice really trump someone else's right to live?

"Death is happening in these wards where even family members can't visit their loved ones when they're sick with Covid, so the death and the severity of this disease are really invisible to the public," said Kumi Smith, an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota who studies infectious diseases.

It leads some people to brush the issue aside.

"I'm empathetic that anyone has to die ever, but that's the reality of our lives. And I almost feel like if I'm going to get Covid and die from it, then so be it," said Gina, a Pennsylvania real estate agent who wears a mask at work but otherwise opposes mask mandates.

But the empathy question also works the other way — **attacking people for not wearing a mask** doesn't change minds. An **open, more forgiving conversation** might. That's what happened with Scott Liftman, a 50-year-old man from Massachusetts who read a story in the Atlantic about **men who won't wear masks**. He contacted the article's author, Harvard epidemiologist Julia Marcus, and has come around — somewhat — on the idea of putting one on, at least in certain situations.

"I want to be sensitive, I want to follow scientific principles, but I also want to exercise common sense, too," Liftman told me. "You never want to read something that just shames you. I really think that no two people are so different that they can't find some common ground."

"These people are part of our community, and they are putting other people at risk," Marcus said. "If you can inch some people, you will see risk reduction overall."

Freedom, but for your face

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to spin out of control in the United States, many states, localities, and businesses have turned to requiring people to wear masks in the hope the measure will slow the spread of infection. Currently, **34 states** have mask mandates, and **polls show** a hefty majority of Americans would support a national mask mandate, as well.

For those who disagree, that's partially where the problem resides: They insist they're not anti-mask, they're anti-mandate. "If you want to wear a mask, great. I will never look down on you, have anything bad to say to you, do what you want. But the mandates are what I disagree with and I don't think are right, especially now," Gina said.

Rallies against mask mandates have **popped up** across the country, much like the protests to reopen the economy that took place at state capitols earlier this year. People wanted the freedom to get a haircut; now they want the freedom to go to the grocery store without covering their face.

Some of the people I spoke with drew the line, specifically, at government mandates. It's one thing for a private business to require customers to wear a mask, they said, but another thing for a state government to do it. Private establishments "have a right to do so, and you should respect those rules," Jason, a paramedic from Michigan, said.

Others, however, chafed at rules from businesses, too. Members of one Facebook group circulated a list of stores with mask requirements, chatting about boycotting those retailers or visiting to try to challenge the rules.

When I spoke with Jacqueline, who lives in Wyoming, she was upset over the mask requirement at her local Menards. She'd been to the home improvement store, sans mask, twice in recent days — the first time, she was allowed to make her purchase despite ignoring the rules, but the second time, she had no such luck. She was asked to leave the store after a physical altercation ensued — Jacqueline says a worker pushed her, the store says she rammed someone with a cart — and management called the police to file a report. She's now banned from the store. "They don't have to ban me because I'll never go back again," Jacqueline said. She told me she'll go to Home Depot instead. (It also **appears to require** masks for customers.)

As to why she believes she's exempt from the rules, Jacqueline cited the 14th Amendment of the **US Constitution**. "No states are allowed to make laws that take our freedoms and liberties away," she said.

But then she mentioned a mask exemption card she got — not from a doctor, but from a friend. It appears she has one of the **fake cards** some people are using to try to get out of wearing a mask by claiming they have a disability. "I get overheated really easy," she explains.

The issue with the freedom argument is that wearing a mask is about more than protecting yourself — there's growing evidence masks are useful for protecting others from those who may have Covid-19 and not know it. Not wearing a mask may encroach on another person's freedom to go out in relative safety.

Part of the problem is the facts have changed. Another part is where the facts are coming from.

There is no denying that Covid-19 messaging from official channels has, at times, been confusing and contradictory. Early on, people were told not to wear a mask, but now that's changed. Scientific consensus evolves with new information, this is a new disease, and like it

or not, the world is **full of uncertainty**.

Given that uncertainty, it makes sense people would have doubts. If officials changed their minds on masks before, what's to stop them from doing it again? Some people also feel the pandemic isn't as bad as it was made out to be in the spring. They don't know very many people, if anyone, who have gotten sick, and in some places, especially more rural areas, **masks just aren't that common**.

Among those I spoke with, however, I noticed that while the conversation might begin with contradictory messaging and doubts about efficacy, it often devolved into conspiracy theories. The mainstream media was lying, they said, asking whether I'd seen this video on YouTube or followed that person on Twitter. Jacqueline's Facebook timeline was filled with posts the platform had flagged as false, and with diatribes that the company was censoring her. She told me she hurt her hand several weeks prior, and that she had weighed going to the emergency room but decided against it: She's 65 and believes she'd automatically be given a positive Covid-19 test and placed on a ventilator to likely die.

Bryan, who lives in New Jersey, declined to speak on the phone for this story out of concern I might misconstrue his words. He opted to communicate via LinkedIn, sending, over several days, more than 4,000 words explaining his thoughts on masks and the pandemic. Initially, he said his main issue was the mandate.

"What the mandates have done is scare people into believing they are a must if they are to avoid catching the virus. And because those scared few feel that way, they become angry and vile towards anyone who does not share in their fear," he wrote.

Bryan told me that he and his fellow "truth seekers" have always questioned the numbers on Covid-19's mortality rate, and he expressed doubts about government officials' advice and the media's coverage of the pandemic. He acknowledged that some of what he was saying made him sound like a conspiracy theorist, but also leaned in: He believes masks are a step in "getting people into compliance so that they can make vaccines mandatory as well." His theory: "Soon it will be, 'take the vaccine,' or you can't travel, shop, etc." Or worse, he said, digital IDs or "health care passports."

Certain theories and conspiracies came up over and over again. Nearly everyone I spoke with referenced a **single Florida man** whose death in a motorcycle crash was erroneously listed as a Covid-19 death, saying it was evidence the virus's fatality count was vastly overstated. (**Research** has shown that coronavirus deaths are likely underreported.) Many said that hydroxychloroquine is the miracle cure for Covid-19, despite **evidence it is likely ineffective**, and that efforts to develop other drugs or a vaccine are simply a ploy by Big Pharma to make money. Sometimes Bill Gates was involved, though exactly why he was painted as a nefarious figure was somewhat unclear.

Bryan mentioned an **event** related to pandemic preparedness, hosted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in October 2019, as evidence of activity that seems "strangely coincidental" given current events. "Who is one of the ones backing all of that 'preparedness?' Good ole Bill Gates, a man who not long ago had a huge image problem due to some monopolistic practices, etc. Now he seems to have revived his image because he is a 'virus and vaccine expert'?" Bryan wrote.

Most of the people I spoke with got their information from their own "independent investigations" or content they found on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

"YouTube is where alternative thinkers are going to do their thinking," Mak, whose hot yoga studio in British Columbia was shut down due to the coronavirus, told me.

"There's definitely some sort of an agenda here to initiate control upon the people and to make people more obedient and compliant, and see which people are going to comply with some directives," he said.

Some anti-maskers have turned to making content of their own. Tanya, also from British Columbia, had gone to local hospitals to try to record what was going on and prove that media stories about the outbreak were false.

"I know they're lying to the masses," she told me. "I don't know anybody who has had coronavirus, I don't know anybody who knows anybody, and I know a lot of people."

"Anti-maskers will say masks are making you breathe in your own carbon dioxide," said Eleanor Murray, an epidemiologist at Boston University. "That's not at all a thing, because we know ... there are plenty of people whose occupations require them to wear a mask."

Politics is part of it, but not all of it

Like so many things, **masks have become a politicized issue**. President Donald Trump and many Republicans have spent months using them as a political lightning rod. Some have since changed their tune — the president has begun recommending masks, though his message **hasn't been consistent or wholehearted**.

"The challenge is that when you had political leaders early on saying we are not wearing masks, we don't think it's important, we don't think it's a good idea, there are a lot of people in the country who very, very seriously follow President Trump," said Catherine Sanderson, a professor of psychology at Amherst College. "When you have somebody in that sort of a vivid role saying, 'I'm not going to do this,' it creates a norm people are motivated to follow."

Jacqueline told me she believes the pandemic death count has been inflated in an effort to undermine the president. "They're all saying this so that they can make the president look bad, so they can cause the problems they are causing," she said.

Politicization is playing out at a much more local level, too. I spoke with Anthony Sabatini, a member of the Florida House of Representatives who has **filed multiple lawsuits** over mask mandates. Ahead of our interview, he emphasized he's worried about mandates and government overreach, not the masks themselves.

During our discussion, he initially claimed police would be going into businesses and homes, checking to see whether people were wearing a mask. When I asked for evidence, he referenced an ordinance against gatherings of more than 10 people — not masks — but claimed they were "part and parcel" of the same issue. When I asked Sabatini whether he personally wears a mask, his initial response was, "Where? In my bed?" I clarified: when he goes out, like to the grocery store. Sabatini, who is 31, told me he doesn't go to the grocery store because he's "too busy" and "a millennial," and therefore eats out all the time. He

conceded he sometimes goes to the grocery store, so when I asked whether he wears a mask there, he insisted I name which specific store.

Sabatini said older people are generally most at risk of dying of Covid-19, adding that he is "very careful" around them — specifically those 82 or older. The majority of deaths have been in nursing homes, he explained, and he doesn't know anyone personally in a nursing home. "Anyone in my age group, it's just rare that you know anybody that's in that age group," he said.

According to the **Florida House of Representatives' website**, there were more than 500 people residing in nursing facilities in Sabatini's district as of the 2010 census, and about 5 percent of the population he represents is age 80 or older.

"Grandmas and grandpas die all the time"

Spring outside of my Brooklyn apartment had been a symphony of sirens. If there's a chance wearing a piece of cloth over my face will do something to help stop that, that's fine by me. It was an issue I posed to many of the anti-maskers: If I'm wrong, the worst that happens is I was a little uncomfortable at the grocery store in July. If you're wrong, you and others could get sick and die. Is that worth the risk?

"I don't want to be responsible for killing anybody," Gina, the Pennsylvania real estate agent, told me, though she still insisted the virus is overblown. "If the cases weren't reported on anymore and talked about, coronavirus would be gone."

"I hear all the time, people are like, 'I'd rather be safe than sorry, I don't want to be a grandma killer.' I'm sorry to sound so harsh," Mak said, chuckling. "I'm laughing because grandmas and grandpas die all the time. It's sad. But here's the thing: It's about blind obedience and compliance."

As tempting as it is for many people to write off the anti-mask crowd, it's not that simple. As Lois Parshley recently outlined for Vox, **enforcing a mask mandate** is a difficult and complex task. But it's an important one: A lot of anti-maskers also have doubts about a vaccine, which public health experts say will be a crucial part of **moving past the pandemic**.

"Masks are actually probably a proxy for not believing in science, not believing in experts," Amherst College's Sanderson said. "The challenge, of course, is when there is a vaccine, these are the same group of people who are saying they're not getting a vaccine."

So how do you break through? As enticing as it may be for some people to shame and attack people who won't wear a mask, it's probably not the answer.

"One of the challenges is that you need to bring people to your side without saying, 'You're stupid,' because when it's, 'You're stupid,' it's very hard to convince someone," said Sanderson, who's also the author of ***Why We Act: Turning Bystanders Into Moral Rebels***, a book about social norms.

As difficult (and at times contentious) as some of the conversations were, across the board, everyone was extremely nice. They also sent follow-up information to try to get me to see things their way. It's easy to see how, for someone who's on the fence, you might get sucked

in: If pro-mask Bob tells you you're a murderer but anti-mask Sue tells you she's got a video you should see, you might prefer to deal with Sue.

Masks aren't a panacea, Smith, from the University of Minnesota, said. But that doesn't mean they're not worthwhile. "We're at this point where we are desperate in the United States," she said. "I'm not about to argue anti-maskers down and say, 'No, this will save everybody's lives most definitely,' but I think to reject it wholesale because some scientist changed their mind is really problematic."

Like it or not, we're all in this together, mask on or mask off. And just like the science can change, minds can too.

Liftman, the Massachusetts man who spoke with the Harvard epidemiologist who wrote about **men who won't wear masks**, told me his conversation with the writer changed his mind. He felt like she showed compassion and didn't condemn him. He's still a little skeptical — he thinks it's bad he's supposed to wear a mask when ordering from the ice cream truck outside. But when he's inside a store or in a crowded area, he gets it. While he still believes in individual liberty, he says it's not just about himself, it's also about the worker at the grocery store who doesn't have a choice, and the person next to him in line.

"I was kind of very skeptical about the whole thing. Is this about government control? Do we really need it? As the science has evolved, I've become more in line with the idea that we really should protect ourselves more often than I initially thought," Liftman said. Speaking with Marcus, and another virologist he reached out to, made a difference. "It opened my eyes up to being a little bit more sensitive."

Exhibit 4

Social media is straddling between saving freedoms at one end, and censoring content by restricting access to extremist groups and those who are potentially dangerous for societies at the other end.

Straddling free speech and censorship: What social media should do to stay afloat

Social media, including Facebook and Twitter, is facing increasing pressure from both politicians and activists throughout the world as fake news and propaganda have found a fertile ground on these new platforms. A recent example proving that the problem is relevant is an attempt of Donald Trump, the outgoing president of the US, to repeal Section 230 of the 1996 Communication Decency Act — a legal shield for tech companies against court trials for publishing controversial content or giving the floor to people or groups that might be seen as extremist.

"No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider," Section 230 reads. In other words, tech companies don't have responsibility for posting unlawful information in contrast to journalists and publishers.

Trump and other politicians believe that such laws create numerous loopholes for spreading potentially disruptive content on Twitter, Facebook and the like. "Section 230, which is a liability shielding gift from the US to 'Big Tech' (the only companies in America that have it — corporate welfare!), is a serious threat to our National Security & Election Integrity (sic)," Trump recently wrote on Twitter while threatening to veto the US $740 billion defence budget bill if Section 230 "is not completely terminated."

In other words, tech companies don't have responsibility for posting unlawful information in contrast to journalists and publishers.

Warning tags

Such an ultimatum from the US president — his threat to veto the defence budget if tech giants will keep enjoying the perks of Section 230 — might be seen as blackmail and will probably spell trouble for Twitter or Facebook, at least politically. In fact, Trump and his fellow Republicans just started a political battle against tech companies and their owners, many of whom support the Democrats. The US president argues that social media selectively censors the posts of conservative politicians like himself, pointing to the times Twitter has repeatedly tagged many of his tweets on the 2020 elections with fact-checking warnings that say, "this claim about election fraud is disputed."

However, Twitter's warning tags of Trump's posts cannot be seen as censorship technically, because the president is still allowed to publish whatever he wants. Twitter's policy rather works like a disclaimer, informing audiences that the tagged content might be false or controversial. It resembles the tactics of many media outlets, which mark all op-ed articles of contributors with the note that the opinions of non-staff writers don't necessarily reflect the view of an editorial team.

Block and ban

In July, Twitter banned several accounts that pushed conspiracy theories driven by the pro-Trump QAnon movement, which was once described as a "domestic terror threat" by the FBI. In November, the company also blocked Steve Bannon, Trump's former top adviser, after his calls for beheading public figures during his podcast on Twitter.

Although such measures resemble censorship, they can be justified as part of a consistent fight against domestic extremism, because hate speech and violence rhetoric on social media might spin out of control and spill into the streets eventually. Bannon's account, for instance, was "permanently suspended for violating the Twitter Rules, specifically our policy on the glorification of violence," a Twitter spokesperson told CBS News.

That's another problem that indicates that tech giants are trapped in a tricky dilemma — how to save freedoms on the Internet and limitedly restrict them at the same time, and how not to overreact.

Reasonable policy

These two approaches mentioned above — tagging controversial posts with warnings and blocking radical points of views — seem to be reasonable in today's world. After all, amidst growing pressure on big tech companies for granting too many opportunities to those who might act in bad faith, disclaimer tags and targeted blockings are the only way to keep at bay numerous critics and ward off their attacks.

Tech companies should abide by the policy of limited banning and tagging disputed content if they really want to enjoy freedoms in the future.

At first glance, such moves may appear to be a double standard. Yet, if one puts oneself in the shoes of these social giants, it will become clear that it is the lesser evil, if one were to choose between full-fledged censorship on the on hand, and warning tags and targeted blocking on the other. Tech companies should abide by the policy of limited banning and tagging disputed content if they really want to enjoy freedoms in the future.

The main problem, however, remains unresolved: Social media is straddling between saving freedoms at one end, and censoring content by restricting access to extremist groups and those who are potentially dangerous for societies at the other end. They are between two fires, and this means that they should satisfy the interests of both conflicting groups, which is difficult. Ironically, social media faced pressure from both conservatives and liberals in the US. While Republicans criticise tech giants for alleged censorship, Democrats lambast them for the lack of censorship regarding fake news and posts spurring hatred and violence in society.

Ironically, social media faced pressure from both conservatives and liberals in the US.

In such a situation, tech companies are the hostages of political processes. Again, the only way to navigate such turbulent waters is to employ warning tags and targeted banning throughout the world, no matter how controversial such measures might look. It is a necessary sacrifice.