



From the Desk of Leonard Garfield,
MOHAI Executive Director

COVID-19 and the Body Politic

When future historians look back to assess the impacts of the [coronavirus pandemic](#), they will tally the number of infections and the tragic toll of deaths. But they will also examine repercussions to our civic life and the health of our democracy. If the example of history's greatest pandemic offers lessons, it is likely that the impact could be lasting. A century ago, the [Spanish Flu's](#) devastating spread coincided with the final fight for women's suffrage. That milestone moment came at a time when American women were on the frontlines of the pandemic battle, caring for the ill, sewing masks, raising funds for hospitals. They were heroes whose service was rightly seen as essential to the nation's recovery, and the success of the suffrage battle was in part attributable to sacrifices made by women during the health crisis. It is no surprise that [Bertha Knight Landes](#), Seattle's first woman mayor—and the first woman mayor of any large American city—gained invaluable experience as a Red Cross volunteer fighting the 1918 flu.

This year, on the centennial of the ratification of the [women's suffrage amendment](#) to the U.S. Constitution, MOHAI will take a closer look at democracy in our region, with an exhibit and set of programs that explore the democratic experience and the evolving tools of self governance. (MOHAI will be announcing a revised schedule for the exhibit and programs in the weeks ahead.) Though especially timely in this election year, the sudden appearance of the COVID 19 pandemic adds greater urgency to our exploration.

We know that times of national crisis have precipitated profound changes to the democratic system. The [Civil War](#) led to a fundamental expansion of American democracy and a new understanding of the nation's founding ideals. The [Great Depression](#) paved the way toward popular acceptance of a strong federal government, as Americans embraced an alphabet soup of government programs that would build the social and physical infrastructure of the 20th century. The aftermath of [World War II](#) set in motion government initiatives that would strengthen an expanded middle class but also lead to the [civil rights revolution](#) of the 1950s



and 60s. Even the terrorist attacks of [September 11, 2001](#), resulted in an infrastructure of federal intelligence gathering that continues to raise questions about the balance between national security and personal privacy in our democracy. No crisis leaves the system unchanged.

What impacts will COVID 19 have on our democratic experiment? It is impossible to say with certainty, of course, but we can begin to see clues. For example, Washington’s early adoption of [voting-by-mail](#), introduced as an efficient way to expand participation, has gained new relevance in an election season when in-person voters might be exposed to illness. And more questions emerge: How many of us can now identify governors and mayors whose names were unfamiliar just a few months before? Will we continue to monitor public discourse and political process so closely even after the crisis has passed? Will the massive government programs of the last few weeks –programs that echo measures from the Great Depression and Great Recession—once more change the relationship between government and the individual, between public investment and private initiative? And in a broader social context, will we continue to salute the heroes of the pandemic—scientists and public servants, doctors and delivery drivers—whose work may have been under-appreciated in more “normal” times? If our frontline workers gain stature as history makers during the crisis, in the aftermath will we still honor them for their invaluable role in American life?

The questions about the pandemic’s impact on our democracy will continue to emerge, and the answers will only become clear with the passage of time. What is certain, however, is that when the stay-at-home orders are lifted and the social distance rules relaxed, we as American citizens and voters will remain on the frontlines of civic life, responsible for protecting the ongoing health of our democratic system. I look forward to exploring these ideas with you this election year as MOHAI takes a closer look at our democracy.