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Coronavirus reveals how important the nation is to our daily lives

Michael Skey, Loughborough University
César Jiménez-Martínez, Cardiff University

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Post-Print Version

The coronavirus pandemic cuts across borders, cultures and political systems. As the virus spread across the planet, global institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) called for worldwide solidarity, arguing that "we're all in this together and we can only stop it together".

Despite the very obvious global nature of the pandemic and some of the more humanitarian responses to it, it has often been discussed in terms of national territories, priorities and communities.

Some have argued that nationalism is a worrying side-effect of the virus, pointing to the closure of national borders as a threat to globalisation or noting how some political leaders have tried to blame other countries. For instance, both the Trump administration in the US and the Bolsonaro administration in Brazil have courted controversy by blaming China for the coronavirus crisis.

The problem with these arguments is that they tend to view nationalism in very narrow, and very negative, terms. Often nationalism is associated with the actions of politicians or groups who are labelled as extremist, such as Hungary's Victor Orbán or France's Marine La Pen. But if we want to make sense of the continuing salience and power of the nation, particularly in times of crisis, we need a wider understanding of nationalism.

Shaped by national borders

Our research argues that nationalism is much better defined as an established belief system, broadly accepted by many people around the globe – rather than an extremist ideology. Put simply, the world is perceived as "naturally" divided into identifiable nations, which influence the way people think and behave, and their responsibilities and entitlements.

Such a definition not only encompasses the nasty aspects of nationalism, but also points to the ways in which the lives of very ordinary people are often defined, represented and discussed in national terms. For example, by making an Italian meal, telling a joke about Canadians, researching the history of Japan or planning a visit to India.

The extreme nationalist outbursts also only make sense in relation to the unremarkable stuff that seems to generate much less concern or interest. In other

words, Donald Trump's diatribes against the "Chinese virus" only make sense in a world where most people take for granted that there is a country called China that has its own territory, history, government, culture and food.

The current pandemic has frequently been defined and understood in national terms. First and foremost, media reporting of the virus has primarily focused on the impact it's having in particular nations, from China to South Korea, Iran, Italy and so on. The virus may ignore national borders, but our understanding of it continues to be shaped by those very borders.

Coming 'home'

A second issue is the way in which responses to the virus are often shaped by national priorities and objectives. Global institutions such as the WHO and UN have coordinated some of the response to the pandemic and advised states on how best to deal with it. But it is national governments that are seen as primarily responsible for managing the pandemic and protecting "their" citizens.

One of the major responses by governments has been to recall citizens to their homeland and close national borders. Far from uniting humanity in a global endeavour, the pandemic has actually reinforced the physical and symbolic boundaries between a country's citizens and foreigners. These actions may be viewed as exceptional but they are rarely reported as unjustified – it seems pretty normal that each person should belong to a nation which they return to during a moment of extreme crisis.

This also explains concerns about people stranded "abroad". It is related to feelings of solidarity and calls to take care of each other, which are often aimed at fellow nationals rather than to the whole of humankind. In Britain, this can be seen in the groundswell of support for the country's National Health Service. This idea of having a homeland where you can return, and where you feel relatively comfortable and protected, is what makes the nation such a powerful symbol during a time of global crisis.

As the crisis has progressed, it also seems that competition has increasingly characterised the way in which governments and citizens understand and narrate its spread and impact. Public debates have compared how well or badly national authorities have managed the situation, lambasting those who are seen to be either ill-equipped or adopting "incorrect" policies. There is also competition between governments to get hold of equipment to protect "their" citizens.

While solutions to the current pandemic obviously need to be global, national systems and communities continue to bring comfort to people during this time of anxiety and uncertainty.
Dismissing nationalism as only the work of extremists or ideologues doesn't take us very far in understanding why national forms of identification and solidarity still continue to matter to so many people around the globe.