

# TOWARD A MORE JUST AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

SIPA faculty scholars and practitioners are working across disciplines  
to tackle the most complicated social issues of our day.

BY STEPHEN KURCZY



## I. 'CRISES CREATE OPPORTUNITIES'

It's an iconic photograph: peaceful protestors, all sitting and some literally holding their fingers in a peace gesture, being tear-gassed by a police officer wearing riot gear and a gas mask.

Sounds like 2020 in cities across the US. It was actually 1999 in Seattle, when a loose collective of more than 50,000 environmentalists, labor rights advocates, indigenous groups, and other activists demonstrated together during a World Trade Organization summit. Suresh Naidu was in the thick of it all—many years before he would become a professor in economics and international and public affairs at SIPA.

Then a young protester from the Canadian island of Newfoundland on the far opposite side of the continent, Naidu was tear-gassed while helping form a human barricade to block WTO officials from entering a building. When a suited economist yelled at him, "I've spent 20 years of my life studying trade!" Naidu had an epiphany: he would become an economist who investigated the issues he cared passionately about, such as worker rights, union labor, and wealth disparities.

Two decades later, Naidu's research is shining a light on the very issues he vowed to examine. With the COVID-19 pandemic throwing the US economy into recession and reform protests sweeping the country, scholarship from Naidu and his SIPA colleagues into the most complicated social issues of our day—inequality, discrimination, race, and democracy—helps to explain what is happening now as well as how society can move forward in a positive way.

Building on a theme across his research, Naidu believes the current crisis can help push the US and the world to become a more democratic society on a path to stronger economic growth. There's a caveat, he warns: the country could also fall backward.

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## II. 'A JUST SOCIETY OWES MUCH MORE'

The crises of 2020 have forced a reckoning. The pandemic has claimed more than 200,000 lives in the US, with Latinx and Black Americans three times more likely to become infected and twice as likely to die as white people. Tens of millions of US workers have lost employment, with women losing more jobs and Hispanic women experiencing the greatest job losses. Concurrently, nationwide demonstrations sparked by the police killing of George Floyd have spotlighted how Black people are disproportionately subject to police force and nearly three times as likely to die at the hands of police officers.

These harsh realities sparked the beginnings of a serious policy discussion on labor rights and race issues.

"Before you develop a policy, you have to know what problem you're trying to solve, and that's a discussion in and of itself," says Michael Nutter, the David N. Dinkins Professor of Professional Practice in Urban and Public



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Affairs and former two-term mayor of Philadelphia. "You have to have data, look at the data, and think how you translate data into policy and programs."

SIPA research is helping reveal the inequities with hard data. In a study this past spring to take the pulse of America's essential workers amid the pandemic, Naidu and his colleague Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, an associate professor of international and public affairs, conducted a national survey with Columbia University faculty Adam Reich and Patrick Youngblood. They found Black essential workers were nearly twice as likely as white essential workers to express concern about infection risk.<sup>1</sup> Black, Latinx, and younger workers were also more likely to go to work with a fever because of financial insecurity and lack of paid sick leave—findings with direct policy implications.

"We think that really demonstrates that paid sick leave isn't just a nice thing to have or perhaps a moral responsibility," Hertel-Fernandez says, "it's a public health imperative."

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Their study also discovered that wages for essential workers had been stagnant, underscoring how the market was failing to compensate for what had become a deadlier job overnight. That finding informed an op-ed for the *Washington Post* in which Naidu questioned "whether extreme economic circumstances have turned the workers we call heroes into something closer to forced labor. If so, that realization ought to shape our public policies: a just society owes much more than minimal pay and a few plexiglass shields to the citizens—and noncitizens—it compels into service."



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ALEXANDER HERTEL-FERNANDEZ

Part of the problem of today’s stagnant wages is a lack of worker bargaining power, which is a research focus for both Naidu and Hertel-Fernandez. In a working paper based on hourly-wage data from three US states,<sup>2</sup> Naidu has found that more laborers are paid \$10 than any other number, which essentially means that—even before the pandemic—workers were not being fairly compensated by the market for their productivity. Through another poll conducted this year, Hertel-Fernandez found that many American workers are seeking greater voice and representation in management decisions<sup>3</sup>—for example, whether customers will be mandated to wear face masks amid a pandemic.

Hertel-Fernandez and Naidu have previously found growing support for unions and labor action,<sup>4</sup> based in part on positive public reactions to the 2018 teachers’ strikes in the US. This new interest in worker voice can also be explained as a public backlash to the defunding of social programs in recent decades, a trend detailed in Hertel-Fernandez’s 2019 book, *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States—and the Nation*. The book, which won the American Political Science Association’s Robert A. Dahl Award, documents how money has influenced policy in ways playing out amid the pandemic, particularly when it comes to gutted unemployment insurance systems. Hertel-Fernandez’s forthcoming book, *Millionaires and Billionaires United*, will further document the rise and impact of wealthy-donor networks.

“My research points to ways in which our democracy is shaped by inequalities of economic resources,” says Hertel-Fernandez. “It also points to ways in which that could change. Strikes play an important role in conveying grievances and creating economic and political power for people who might otherwise not have it through the ballot box.”

### III. ‘WE TEACH WITH NEW YORK’

SIPA is also trying to empower people at the ballot box. Since 2013, the SIPA-based nonprofit Who’s on the Ballot has informed New York City residents on their polling place, voting date, and nonpartisan information about candidates. Funded by a Columbia College alumnus and staffed by SIPA graduate students, the project has been assisting with voter-registration efforts and updating residents about mail-in voting procedures.

Who’s on the Ballot engages SIPA students on issues of race, equity, and democracy—which is integral to being a part of “Columbia University in the City of New York,” says political science professor Ester Fuchs, executive director of Who’s on the Ballot and director of SIPA’s Urban and Social Policy concentration.

SIPA provides its students with quantitative and qualitative tools to evaluate policy, but part of its core mission is for students to evaluate policy through the lens of fairness and equity, according to Fuchs. “It’s a much broader view of how you implement and evaluate policy,” she says. “It includes questions that

consider race, civic engagement, poverty, economic opportunity, inequity, and disparity. All those words which have now gained currency in our political discourse are essential to a SIPA education and are especially important in understanding as well as improving urban policy outcomes.”

Fuchs points to a recent research study by four graduate students who analyzed arrests in New York City for fare evasion on subways and buses. Their resulting paper demonstrated that this policy had a disproportionate negative impact on Black New Yorkers. Earlier this year, New York State attorney general Letitia James (a former SIPA student) launched an investigation into the matter.

“We ask students to be part of this city while they’re here,” says Fuchs, a former special adviser on governance and strategic planning for part of Michael Bloomberg’s term as New York City mayor. “We ask them to volunteer, to be part of research efforts, to intern, to explore the city’s neighborhoods, and to learn firsthand what it means to live in a diverse multicultural city, [and] not just to focus on the challenges of the diversity and poverty that you often find in a city, but also the strength that comes from the diversity—the economic, political, and cultural contributions of every community.”

The pandemic has highlighted the special challenges many communities face. In New York City, as of July 2020, Black, Latinx, and low-income neighborhoods have suffered the highest rates of virus deaths. Over two months in the spring, of 40 police arrests in the borough of Brooklyn for social-distancing violations, all but one person was Black or Latinx, underscoring how race and ethnicity factored into who police targeted. Citywide, 92 percent of arrests for social-distancing enforcement were Black or Latinx.

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ESTER FUCHS

Patients at hospitals in lower-income communities have been three times more likely to die than patients in the wealthiest parts of the city, the result of disparities in staffing, equipment, and access to drug treatments, according to a *New York Times* analysis in July. In an op-ed for *Newsweek*, Nutter called attention to how majority-Black counties were seeing nearly six times the death rate as white communities, underscoring the need for monitoring.

“We’re living in a moment in which it’s really fundamental to ask ourselves questions about inequities and inequalities and how resources are distributed,” says Yasmine Ergas, director of SIPA’s specialization on Gender and Public Policy and coeditor of a new book, *Reassembling Motherhood: Procreation and Care in a Globalized World*, which looks at inequality and discrimination in relation to reproduction.

Ergas highlights how women have also been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. With women filling a majority of service-sector and health-care jobs, they have greater exposure to the virus. And because women on average spend more time than men caring for children, the closure of day-care centers and schools increases women’s caretaking burdens and makes working more difficult if not impossible, resulting in a sharp decline in female workforce participation.

Lurking behind the health and economic crises is the slow-moving crisis of climate change, which also disproportionately affects women and minorities, notes Ergas, who has advised New York City as well as the United Nations on women's rights and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people. Black mothers — who are already two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women — are more likely to have children who are premature, underweight, or stillborn as a result of exposure to rising temperatures and air pollution.



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YASMINE ERGAS

Engagement on these issues also means bringing practitioners into the classroom, which fuels “a blending of academics and public service,” in the words of Nutter, who chairs SIPA’s Diversity Committee alongside 16 student representatives. He is also coleading — with Fuchs — a new committee formed in light of this year’s events to review SIPA’s curriculum and programming as they relate to social justice and race.

Nutter created a fall course called Leadership and Urban Transformation, which aims, he says, “to have the students experience what it’s like to be an elected or appointed official with a serious public policy job.” He also teaches the spring course Critical Issues in Urban Public Policy, which was formerly taught by David N. Dinkins, the only African American to be elected mayor of New York City. Guests have included former secretary of homeland security Jeh Johnson and former New York City Department of Investigations commissioner Rose Gill Hearn. Among part-time faculty who also bring a first-person view on race and public policy are Karine Jean-Pierre MPA ’03, who has worked for MoveOn.org, NBC News, and the Obama White House and in August became chief of staff to vice presidential candidate Kamala Harris; and John C. Liu, former New York City comptroller and City Council member.

And of course, Nutter brings his extensive experience into the classroom. This past spring, he was simultaneously teaching and serving as national political director for then presidential candidate Michael Bloomberg — because, not to be overlooked, this year the US is holding what is widely considered the most important election in a generation.

“Four significant events have occurred at the same time: COVID-19, the fiscal implications of recessions, racial tension and civil unrest, and a presidential election,” says Nutter, adding that he’s been revamping his course curriculum in light of it all. “Those four things certainly could and should shape any public policy discussion that anyone is having in the fall of 2020 and beyond. And all of them are tied together. That is the story of this year.”

## IV. ‘A BETTER PATH’

With so much happening at once and all of it advancing unpredictably, it can feel dismayingly overwhelming. For Naidu, having studied crises across history, such moments of turmoil are full of potential. Crises create oppor-

tunities for a society to become more democratic, he says, and democracy almost invariably leads to higher economic growth over the long term. In one of his most-cited papers, an economic and political analysis of 175 countries from 1960 to 2010 found that a nation that transitions after a crisis from non-democracy to democracy achieves about 20 percent higher GDP per capita over the next 25 years relative to a country that experiences a crisis but remains nondemocratic.<sup>5</sup>

Why does a crisis create opportunities for democratic progress? Such moments spur “regular people” to rise up and demand representation, Naidu says. When the world is crumbling, a person has less to lose from taking action. Consider this year for many people: unemployed, quarantined at home with children, awaiting a potential stimulus check that won’t cover all the expenses. “In that moment, people say, ‘Who are these idiots in charge?’” says Naidu. “It gives you political openings that you don’t have in normal times.”

Naidu’s prime example is the dual crises of the Great Depression and World War II in the 1930s and ’40s. His research reveals this as the one time in 20th-century US history that income inequality fell<sup>6</sup> and the economic fortune of a generation significantly improved.<sup>7</sup> The Great Depression created a political opening for passage of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which guaranteed the right of workers to organize, and World War II then facilitated union growth to its highest density in American history. “There’s no other moment in the US 20th century where you had this kind of giant reduction in inequality,” notes Naidu. In other words, it took two major crises to make the American dream of upward mobility a reality.

Of course, progress isn’t a given. Many crises have not changed politics and policies for the better. The point is that now there’s an opening, a crack in the door to a more just and democratic society. While the pandemic, recession, and widespread protests have caused upheaval, we can emerge economically stronger and socially more equitable by taking this chance to look at the data and address the glaring problems of racial and economic disparity, says Naidu. “We might look back and say, ‘That was really tough, but it set us on a better path.’” [👉](#)

1. “Understanding the COVID-19 Workplace: Evidence From a Survey of Essential Workers,” by Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Suresh Naidu, Adam Reich, and Patrick Youngblood. June 2020. Roosevelt Institute.
2. “Monopsony and Employer Misoptimization Explain Round Number Bunching in the Wage Distribution,” by Suresh Naidu, Alan Manning, and Arindrajit Dube. Working Paper.
3. Memo: “What Americans Think about Worker Power and Organization—Lessons from a New Survey.” May 2020.
4. “Schooled by Strikes? The Effects of Large-Scale Labor Unrest on Mass Attitudes Towards the Labor Movement,” by Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Suresh Naidu, and Adam Reich. 2020. *Perspectives on Politics*.
5. “Democracy Does Cause Growth,” by Suresh Naidu, Daron Acemoglu, James Robinson, and Pascual Restrepo. 2019. *Journal of Political Economy*.
6. “Unions and Inequality in the 20th Century: New Evidence from Survey Data,” by Suresh Naidu, Henry Farber, Dan Herbst, and Ilyana Kuziemko. Working Paper.
7. “U.S. Intergenerational Mobility During the Early 20th Century,” by Suresh Naidu, Ilyana Kuziemko, and Elisa Jacome. Working Paper.