

The Year Ahead 2022

The Year of Results

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CAMBRIDGE – We are waiting for a result – again. One of our loved ones, a little boy, may have caught it at school. We’ll have the results by tonight, supposedly, but who knows? Perhaps they’re up already? Why is the screen so slow to refresh? Could the delay mean something? Is it possible that they are giving us a moment to catch our breath before hitting us with the news? Nothing yet. Wait, how come the screen got refreshed?

In Charlie Chaplin’s wonderful film *Modern Times*, the defining image of modernity is time sped up. Fast machines drive faster lives in his dystopian vision. And yet it is hard to imagine time moving fast for someone in a tollbooth watching cars whizz by, or in a print shop watching the high-speed printer spit out thousands of pages.

It is not machines, it seems to us, but predictable milestones that make time fly – the 12:30 lunch, the 3:00 coffee, the 5:00 commute home, the weekend shopping, the afternoon soccer game, the upcoming school vacation, the annual trip to see the family. Life in the old days felt slow because there was always a wait – for the rains to save the crop, for the wars to stop, for the womb to conceive, for the pests to recede.

Waiting often comes with an element of chance, for better or for worse. Maybe the call will come, maybe the letter is late, maybe the storm will erupt just in time and the exam will be canceled. Perhaps the report will be good news after all. Until we know, our hearts will beat a little quicker, our breathing will be a little shallower, and our minds will skip desultorily from idea to idea while never drifting very far from that one overwhelming concern. Waiting is sweating.

This was, above all, a year of waiting for results that arrived unexpectedly and threw us into a tizzy: someone we had lunch with, whom we knew to be extra careful, unexpectedly ended up with a positive diagnosis. We were contact cases – one of

those dreaded new phrases that has invaded our lives, along with PCR tests and viral loads, mRNA vaccines and KN95 masks. So, we had to be tested multiple times. We had to wait for results multiple times. Sometimes, the news was good, sometimes it was bad, and sometimes we weren't sure what to think. Was it better to receive a negative test, or to learn that you had already contracted the virus and never noticed it?

We would have done anything to make some results come more slowly. In India's second COVID-19 wave, the numbers rose to breathtaking heights within days, overwhelming the underprepared health-care system. Millions of families were left waiting for hospital beds and oxygen tanks for their loved ones; and then, all too often, they waited for a place in the cremation line or burial ground. Other waits have spanned years. We, like many around the world, were waiting for another US presidential election from the day Donald Trump took office. That wait extended into this year, until Joe Biden's election was finally certified by Congress. The wait for the election results, with its minute-by-minute media coverage, seems to have grown more maddening than in the past. Will Wisconsin turn? Will Georgia flip? Who will control the Senate? What's taking North Carolina so long?

And the waiting didn't end there. The race for control of the US Senate did not have to come down to one county in Georgia, and less than 1% of the votes, but it did. The certification count in the Senate eventually happened, but not before Trump and his supporters sought to block it by staging an insurrection at the US Capitol.

COVID-19's arc has in some ways mirrored the presidency of the man who refused to take the disease seriously. There was a shock when it arrived, a lull when it looked like it would be okay, and then a slow turn for the worse. Along the way, there were new results to obsess over – vital signs, oxygen levels, fevers. Results arrived daily – one more thing to wait for without quite knowing what the outcome meant or how to react. Was it good news because the patient's condition had not worsened, or bad news because it had not improved?

The same ambivalence attended the delivery of daily infection counts, which showed up every evening on our phones, courtesy of the French government's *TousAntiCovid* app (we spent the last academic year in France). Is 20,000 high or low? Too high for comfort, surely, but apparently too low for the government to do much about it.

Other results arrived unexpectedly fast. The vaccine trials came as a pleasant surprise. The results rolled in almost before we had mastered the distinction between efficacy and effectiveness. The news was good. Many vaccines worked better than anyone had a right to hope. And yet, with the virus acquiring new mutations that could reduce current vaccines' effectiveness, there are always more results to wait for and puzzle over.

COVID-19 vaccines offered a new source of hope, and a new reason to wait. Much of the world is still wondering when and if enough vaccines will be available for their citizens, while “world leaders” struggle to back their declarations about the need for universal vaccination with actual doses.

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But for those lucky enough to be vaccinated, there is a new question that won't be answered by hitting refresh. When we look back on the scars left by the pandemic, what will we see – just the pain of isolation, or also the joy of everyday human contact? Perhaps it is time to start building on those still-vivid memories toward a new solidarity that is universal without being abstract, built on the palpable pleasure of being together, but stretching to the ends of the world. Maybe that can help us cope with the biggest anxiety of our times.

Those results are also in: the planet was quite literally igniting last summer, and the cyclone season started early. Earth is heating and will continue to heat, making life impossible in some of the densest human settlements today. The wait now is to see whether there is the collective will to face up to these results, to stand up and say “Enough,” to acknowledge that there is no more time for excuses, and that our leaders must do more than talk.

ABHIJIT BANERJEE

Abhijit Banerjee, a Nobel laureate in economics, is Professor of Economics at MIT.

CHEYENNE OLIVIER

Cheyenne Olivier is an artist and illustrator.

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