2020 Election or Impeachment: A Rhetorical Dilemma

By Richard Cherwitz

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Every so often political parties are faced with an enormous dilemma—rhetorical challenges so daunting they appear to be a no-win situation. Often these occasions pit a desire to do the right thing against a concern for political expedience, framing this as a binary choice—either/or.

Democrats today are confronted with such a conundrum about how rhetorically to respond to the Mueller report. I believe they should focus their discourse predominantly on the 2020 election rather than the Mueller report and immediate impeachment. Trump must be voted out of office in the same way he was voted in.

Consider what we know:

First, many Americans seem uninterested in and are weary from the nearly two years of stories about Mueller’s Russia investigation. Frankly, they don’t see how it concretely affects their lives.
Second, public opinion polls consistently confirm that voters are locked into their beliefs about whether President Donald Trump is guilty of legal or other wrongdoings—and whether it even matters.

Third, the media continues to be titillated by the Mueller report and talk of impeachment. It follows that the more the Democrats pursue this rhetorical path, the more likely the media will thwart their efforts to set a positive agenda for 2020, making the election seem more like an anti-Trump campaign.

Fourth, impeachment hearings will take time and energy extending well into and beyond the campaign season. Similarly, there is no evidence to suggest that Republican members of the Senate, who consistently have sided with Trump, will vote to convict Trump should the House approve impeachment.

These are a few of the reasons why Democrats should avoid falling into a trap lessening their chance of winning the White House in 2020 and ultimately failing legally to remove Trump from office.

Some may criticize my argument, claiming it advocates political expedience in lieu of a concern for presidential oversight and doing what is right and constitutionally demanded. This, however, is an inaccurate characterization.

When the framers of the Constitution established a system of checks and balances, they understood that the most powerful check on the president, as well as effective tool for preserving our nation’s institutions and the rule of law, is the vote. Hence, contending that Democrats rhetorically must prioritize the 2020 election over possible impeachment hearings, is not a recommendation for political expedience. Nor does it constitute abdication of the obligation to protect our democracy and preserve presidential oversight. To the contrary.

Pursuing the rhetorical strategy I recommend, there is a better chance Democrats will be successful in voting Trump out of office. As many legal experts note, the result of this is that Trump more likely would be indicted—something not possible while he is a sitting president. More importantly, if Democrats regain control of the executive branch, they will appoint qualified government officials and enact legislation to: restore the rule of law; preserve the sanctity of and faith in the country’s institutions; prevent future presidents from becoming autocrats capable of undermining our government and its longstanding democratic norms; and make sure foreign governments never again will interfere with our elections.
I firmly believe that doing the right and principled thing should not be taken lightly or automatically abandoned because of a partisan desire to win an election. But the issue is not that simplistic and is not a binary choice. As a scholar of communication, I believe Democrats must employ a rhetorical strategy that succeeds in removing Trump from office as quickly as possible, while at the same time enabling government officials to do the right thing constitutionally by holding the president accountable for his illegal, autocratic, dangerous and unpatriotic behavior.

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