The Rhetorical Challenge for Democrats in 2020

By Richard Cherwitz

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The coronavirus pandemic and how our nation is responding to it no doubt will be a major factor in the decision of voters in the 2020 election. As many political pundits and the media have observed, the outcome of the 2020 election likely will be a referendum on how well President Donald Trump has responded to this crisis.

The issue is primarily a rhetorical one and involves how this will play out in the competing discourses of presidential candidates. Let me suggest one possibility that draws on the work of rhetoricians going back to George Campbell and those adhering to Thomas Reid’s notion of faculty psychology.

As a matter of history, some claim that the United States needs more clearly to memorialize and archive the COVID-19 pandemic and all those who have died and will die. From a partisan perspective, Democrats contend that we cannot allow the Trump Administration to normalize the severity and unprecedented nature of this tragedy, nor forget his many failures to respond in a timely manner—failures that cost thousands of lives.
Consider an analogy. Historians often make reference to how FDR in a rhetorically brilliant move came up with the label “Hoovervilles” to describe and make vivid the hundreds of shantytowns that existed as a result of President Herbert Hoover’s inability to provide relief to hundreds of thousands of Americans living in those slums during the Great Depression of the 1930’s. Prior to “Hoovervilles” Democrats coined less rhetorically effective terms to document Hoover’s failure, including “Hoover blanket,” “Hoover flag,” “Hoover leather,” and “Hoover wagon.”

The question is: What can be learned from this? It might be surmised, that the challenge for the Democrats and Biden in 2020 is to develop and employ a host of vivid (and hence more persuasive) rhetorical images to prevent a minority of voters from reelecting Donald Trump. For communication scholars like myself this is a challenge we have the capacity to help meet.

For example, as I have argued in several recent op-eds, part of the rhetorical strategy might include the use of visual rhetoric (photos of food lines, bodies being stored in refrigerated trucks and relatives who could not be with their loved ones at the end of life). This could be supplemented with what 18th century rhetorician George Campbell and philosopher David Hume called “the lively idea.” Using Campbell’s concepts of “vivacity” and resemblance” might allow people to experience the pandemic in a manner similar to the other five senses and hence as more real.

How so? The concepts of vivacity and resemblance are a way, as Hume argued, to “copy nature” by presenting a cause and effect relationship in the “natural order.” Drawing on Hume, Campbell, whose expertise was rhetoric, expanded the traditional understanding of the imagination as an image-making faculty that responds to lively images and pictures.
This image-making power of rhetoric, I suggest, may have the persuasive potential to enable voters to become more cognizant of and feel the health and economic pain that Americans now are suffering—realities that Trump constantly denies, ignores, downplays or, to use the President’s favorite pastime, “plays through.”

In short, while a picture is worth a thousand words, words themselves name what the picture shows, or rather, what we think we see in it. The ultimate impact of the type of visual rhetoric I am proposing, therefore, is that a larger number of voters—regardless of ideology or party preference—will show up and cast a ballot to defeat Trump.

Richard Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor Emeritus in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin.