Language key to holding Trump accountable

Since the release of special counsel Robert Mueller’s “Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election,” and especially following his televised statement on Wednesday, May 29, Democratic members of Congress have endeavored to walk a fine line.

Some argue that impeaching Donald Trump is demanded given the Constitutional mandate for congressional oversight, as well as the obligation to provide a check against the President who is ignoring the rule of law.

Others are taking a more measured and calculated position, suggesting that, while investigations into Trump wrongdoing—legal and otherwise—must continue, launching an impeachment inquiry could have unwanted consequences for the Democrats in the 2020 presidential election.

Admittedly, this situation presents a difficult calculus, as well as an enormous rhetorical dilemma.

Might there be another way to navigate this challenge?

On Friday, Donny Deutsch, a branding and marketing professional and television personality, claimed that, rather than calling for an “impeachment” inquiry, congressional Democrats should conduct a “criminal” inquiry. From a rhetorical perspective, this makes sense. As someone who has spent over four decades studying political language, I find partial merit in Deutsch’s recommendation.

Why?

In 2019 the word “impeachment” has become a highly-charged political term, one that turns off many Americans who currently aren’t yet must be convinced about the importance of the Mueller report—the content of which they may not be reading. Unlike Watergate and other episodes in U.S. history, the term “impeachment” isn’t viewed today with the same seriousness; it is now more casually employed.

Moreover, a continued impeachment chorus allows President Trump, as well as his media and political cronies, to continue spinning their narrative about how the Democrats are behaving in a purely politically motivated manner, harassing him and refusing to move the country forward. Arguably, talk of impeachment even bolsters the persuasive force of that narrative.

Perhaps by invoking the language of “criminal” inquiry the urgency and less partisan nature of the issue can be underscored. Criminality, after all, evokes a very different image than “impeachment” inquiry—one to which more people may pay attention, especially those open to persuasion.

In addition, this rhetorical shift might appease those Democrats who believe that not enough is being done, showing voters how Congress is not abdicating its constitutional duty. At the same time, it might lessen the fear of those who wish to avoid potential 2020 electoral costs they believe will be caused by incessantly talking about impeachment.

Of course, there are those who will repute this idea by saying such an option takes impeachment completely off the table. To the contrary. A criminal inquiry might actually be a more effective first step toward impeachment.

In short, Donny Deutsch’s recommendation is not a silver bullet. But, from a rhetorical perspective, it is worth considering seriously. To be sure, we live in extraordinary times where the typical rules governing politics and rhetoric may no longer be applicable.

So, why not give this approach a try?

Editor’s note: This op-ed was originally published in The Hill, Communication Currents and several other newspapers.

Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium at the University of Texas.