Among other things, the COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the importance of taking a rhetorical perspective to understand our current political environment and the sometimes perplexing actions by the President of the United States, as well as reactions by the public.

Allow me to offer the most recent example supporting this claim.

In his Monday April 13 daily coronavirus briefing President Donald Trump insisted that he has the absolute authority to re-open the country, or at least parts of it. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and many Constitutional scholars have suggested that the President does not have the power to do so, Trump’s protests notwithstanding.
In my opinion, however, whether Trump has the Constitutional authority is a moot question and obscures the real issue.

What matters is the President’s use of the bully pulpit—his rhetorical power. If, for example, Trump declares that the country now is open or should be opened, this will have an enormous persuasive impact. Republican governors likely would act on the President’s words, carrying out his wishes with specific policies and plans to open their states. But, even more consequential, such a presidential pronouncement may encourage a large number of citizens, especially those who support Trump, to let down their guard, becoming less cautious and hence endangering the lives of others in their communities.

What evidence is there to support this argument? During my over 40 year career as a communication scholar, I conducted research on presidential crisis rhetoric, dating back to Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War. In particular, my research in 1986 discussed what I termed “consummatory rhetoric”—instances where presidential discourse initially constitutes the only official reply made by the American government, when no other action is taken. Such rhetoric, as I documented with numerous historical examples, often is far more influential than actions alone.

As has been the case since Trump became President, we again are learning—perhaps the hard way—that what is said may be more consequential than what is done, that words do indeed matter. Sadly, a president’s rhetoric not only has the capacity to buoy a nation during trying times but has the potential to thwart efforts to resolve a crisis.

The lesson for the future: we must be more cognizant of the effects of presidential rhetoric, factoring that into our explanation of the political environment. Acknowledging this might lead to greater and more
concerted efforts by the media and political leaders to expose and halt those cases where a president’s rhetoric has the potential to do harm.

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