The Democrat’s Rhetorical Conundrum

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By Richard Cherwitz

Every so often a political party is faced with an enormous dilemma—a rhetorical challenge so daunting that it appears to be a no-win situation. Often these occasions pit a desire to do the right and principled thing against a concern for political expedience, framing this as a binary choice—either/or.

Make no mistake, Democrats today are confronted with just such a conundrum about how rhetorically to respond to the Mueller Report. I believe that Democrats should focus their discourse predominantly on the 2020 election rather than the Mueller Report and subsequent investigations.

Consider what we know:

First, many Americans seem uninterested in and are weary from the nearly two years of stories about special counsel Robert Mueller’s Russia investigation. Frankly, they don’t see how it concretely affects their lives, and it is hard to imagine what additional details will emerge from the nuanced Mueller Report that could alter this perception.

Second, public opinion polling data consistently confirms that voters are locked into their beliefs about whether President Donald Trump is guilty of legal or other wrongdoings—and whether it even matters. There is no reason to believe this suddenly will change.

Third, the media continues to be titillated by the Mueller report and talk of subpoenas, legal disputes regarding whether Trump and others will be required to
comply with House committee requests, additional investigations, and the possibility of impeachment. It follows, therefore, that the more the Democrats pursue this rhetorical path, the more likely it is the media will thwart their efforts to set the agenda for the 2020 election; it is almost certain that the media will spend less time focusing on economic, healthcare, foreign policy and other issues favoring the Democrats and casting them as more than an anti-Trump party.

Fourth, it is clear that 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 have sided with the President through thick and thin, suddenly will vote to convict Trump should the House approve impeachment.

These are just a few of the reasons why I submit that 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.

Understandably, some may criticize my argument by claiming that it advocates political expedience in lieu of a concern for presidential oversight and doing what is right and constitutionally demanded. This, however, may not be an accurate characterization. Let me clarify.

When the framers of the Constitution established a system of checks and balances, they understood that perhaps 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 additional investigations and possible impeachment hearings, is not a recommendation for political expedience. Nor does it constitute an abdication of the obligation to protect our democracy and preserve presidential oversight. To the contrary.

If Democrats accept the rhetorical strategy I am recommending here, there is a better chance they will be successful in voting Trump out of office. And, as many legal experts remind us, the result of this is that Trump more likely would be indicted—something not possible while he is a sitting president. More importantly, if the Democrats regain control of the executive branch, they—unlike Trump—will appoint qualified government officials and enact legislation to: (1)
restore the rule of law; (2) preserve the sanctity of and faith in the country’s institutions; (3) prevent future presidents from becoming autocrats capable of undermining our government and its longstanding democratic norms; and (4) make sure foreign governments never again will interfere with our elections.

Put simply, 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 and teacher 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.

Focusing primarily on the 2020 election is that rhetorical strategy.

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