We Can Defeat Trump by Appealing to Americans’ Senses

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As a matter of history, the country needs more clearly to memorialize the COVID-19 pandemic and the 100,000 who now have died. 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.

As 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 during the economic crisis of the 1930’s.

What can we learn from this? The challenge for the Democrats and Biden in 2020 is to develop and employ a host of vivid (and hence persuasive) images and words to prevent a minority of voters from reelecting Donald Trump. Perhaps 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 18th century rhetorician George Campbell’s concepts of “vivacity” and “resemblance”—concepts explaining how words can be brought to a level similar to the other five senses. The potential result: Voters might feel the pain that many Americans are suffering and that Trump constantly denies, ignores, downplays or, to use the President’s favorite pastime, “plays through.” The ultimate impact of such rhetoric may be that a larger number of voters—regardless of ideology or party preference—could turn out to cast a ballot against Trump.

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