Yes, Words Do Matter

In his Monday daily coronavirus briefing, President Trump announced that he has the absolute power to reopen the country or at least parts of it. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and many constitutional scholars have suggested that the president does not have the authority to do so. In my opinion, however, whether Trump has the constitutional power is a moot question.

What matters is the president’s rhetorical power. If, for example, Trump declares that the country is open or should be opened, this will have an enormous persuasive impact. Republican governors likely will act on the president’s words, carrying out his wishes. But, even more consequential, such a pronouncement may encourage a larger number of citizens, especially those who support Trump, to let down their guard, becoming less cautious and hence endangering the lives of others.

What evidence is there to support this claim? As a communication scholar, my own research on presidential crisis rhetoric discusses what I term “consummatory rhetoric” — instances where presidential discourse initially constitutes the only official reply made by the American government. Such rhetoric, as I document with historical examples, often is more influential than actions alone. Once again, we are learning that words really matter.

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