When Our Politics Trumps Our Public Health

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If Richard Nixon had his “silent majority,” Donald Trump has his “noisy minority” — or perhaps what might be called the “loud few.” Consider the facts.

Public opinion polling documents that the vast majority of Americans are staying at home (80%) and do not want the country to open prematurely (70%), as is being done by several Republican governors, including Ron DeSantis in Florida, Brian Kemp in Georgia, Henry McMaster in South Carolina and Bill Lee in Tennessee. Reopening also is being contemplated seriously by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and others, though Abbott’s first steps announced last Friday at least stressed caution.

By contrast, a minority of Americans are in the streets loudly protesting against their governors — both Republican and Democratic — who have decided to keep their states locked down. Politics aside, these governors are being cautious and careful, erring on the side of protecting the health and safety of all of their constituents.

Unlike the protesters, who are not following the president’s very own task-force guidelines, these governors understand that taking to the streets is far more than a risk to the health of those who gather in public. It also is a risk to the health of others living in those states.

Admittedly, none of us likes being told to stay at home. Nevertheless, most Americans accept the fact that what’s best for all is what’s needed and in fact demanded in the wake of a life-threatening pandemic; after all, we all are part of a larger us.

As a scholar of political communication, from a rhetorical perspective I find several things about these protests noteworthy. First, the argument used by these protesters to justify what they’re doing is invalid, fallacious and misplaced — as is President Trump’s defense of the protesters. For example, both Trump and those in the streets believe what they are doing is a matter of “personal liberty.” What they don’t understand is that a large number of those with COVID-19 are asymptomatic. Hence, by gathering in public, protesters are infringing upon and denying the personal liberty of others — the liberty not to get sick, not to go the hospital, not to be intubated and not to die.
Second, it is rhetorically significant — yet hardly surprising — that many if not most of those protesting are Trump supporters; listening to them chant and viewing their signs make this evident. Moreover, it is clear from their chosen language that they are directly following, responding to and adopting the president’s words.

Consider also that on a regular basis Trump applauds, encourages and even incites the protesters’ behavior. Just like the president in his daily briefings, protesters are using the coronavirus pandemic as a rhetorical opportunity — a way to create a media spectacle. Put simply, following the lead and example of the president, protesters are exploiting a health crisis to stage campaign rallies.

What’s tragic is that Trump and those in the streets may never realize the consequences of what they are doing. Unfortunately, we live at an unprecedented time in our history when politics rather than health governs our president’s rhetoric and policies and thus the behavior of his supporters.

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