



Trump, Covid and empathy for the world's least empathetic man

Biden is praying for him – and yet the Trump campaign's negative ads continue. There's an asymmetry of decency here



It's possible to be sympathetic toward Trump this weekend while acknowledging that he is subjecting America to a moral test. Photograph: Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

For about a minute today I found myself feeling sorry for Donald Trump. The poor man is now "battling" Covid-19 (the pugilistic verb is showing up all over the news). He's in the hospital. He's out of shape. He's 74 years old. His chief of staff reportedly says his symptoms are "very concerning".

Joe Biden is praying for him. Kamala Harris sends him heartfelt wishes. President Obama reminds us we're all in this together and we want to make sure everyone is healthy.

But hold on: why should we feel empathy for one of the most unempathetic people in the world?

One reason is out of respect. He's a human being. He's our president.

Yet there's an asymmetry here. While the Biden campaign has taken down all negative television advertising, the Trump campaign's negative ads continue non-stop.

And at almost the same time that Biden, Harris and Obama offered prayers and consoling words, the Trump campaign blasted "Lying Obama and Phony Kamala Harris" and charged that

"Sleepy Joe isn't fit to be YOUR President".

Can you imagine if Biden had contracted Covid rather than Trump? Trump would be all over him. He'd attack Biden as weak, feeble and old. He'd mock Biden's mask-wearing – "See, masks don't work!" – and lampoon his unwillingness to hold live rallies:

"Guess he got Covid in his basement!"

How can we even be sure Trump has the disease? He's lied about everything else. Maybe he'll reappear in a day or two, refreshed and relaxed, saying,

"Covid is no big deal."

He'll claim he took hydroxychloroquine, and it cured him. He'll boast that he won the "battle" with Covid because he's strong and powerful, without crediting the best medical care money can buy.

Meanwhile, his “battle” has distracted the nation from revelations that he’s a tax cheat who paid only \$750 in taxes his first year in office, and barely anything for 15 years before that; and that he’s a failed businessman who’s still losing money.

And from his cringeworthy debate performance last week, in which he didn’t want to condemn white supremacists.

It even takes our mind off the major reason Covid is out of control in America: because Trump blew it. He downplayed it, pushed responsibility on to governors, and then demanded they allow businesses to reopen – too early – in order to make the economy look good before the election.

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He has muzzled and disputed experts at the CDC, promoted crank cures, held maskless campaign events, and encouraged followers not to wear masks. All of this has contributed to tens of thousands of unnecessary American deaths.

Trump’s “battle” with Covid also diverts attention from his and Mitch McConnell’s perversions of American democracy.

This is where the asymmetry is deeper. McConnell is now moving to confirm Trump’s supreme court nominee Amy Coney Barrett, after having prevented Obama’s nominee from getting a Senate vote for almost a year on the basis of a concocted “rule” that the next president should decide.

Yet Biden won’t talk about increasing the size of the court in order to balance it, and Democratic leaders have shot down the idea.

Nor do Biden and top Democrats want to suggest making Washington DC and Puerto Rico into states – a step that would remedy the bizarre inequities in the Senate where a bare majority of Republicans representing 11 million fewer Americans than their Democratic counterparts are able to confirm a supreme court justice.

It would also help rebalance the electoral college¹, which made Trump president in 2016 despite losing the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by more than 3 million.

Democrats worry this would strike the public as unfair. Unfair, when Trump won’t even commit to a peaceful transition of power and refuses to be bound by the results?

When he’s already claiming the election is rigged against him and will be fraudulent unless he wins?

When he’s now readying slates of Trump electors to be certified in states he’ll allege he lost because of fraud? When he’s urging his followers to intimidate Biden voters at the polls?

Whether responding to Trump’s hospitalization this weekend or to Trump’s larger political maneuvers, Democrats want to act decently and nicely, to take the high road and be fair. They want to protect democratic norms, values and institutions.

This is admirable. It’s also what Democrats say they stand for.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2020/sep/02/electoral-college-explained-biden-uphill-battle-us-election>

But the other side isn't playing the same game. Trump and his enablers will do anything to retain and enlarge their power.

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What kind of society does the nation want: one based on decency and democracy, or on viciousness and raw power?

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