

Trump, Race, and the Government's Response to Covid-19



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Abstract

This chapter is a content analysis of Trump's response to the new coronavirus. It begins with a brief history of the social contract and the government's responsibility to all members of society. The chapter is reliant upon articles on the Internet, publications, including national newspapers and magazines as a data base. There is an analysis of emergent themes, from these publications, as they relate to Trump and/or the federal government's response to Covid-19. Based upon analytic induction, the chapter discusses emergent themes from e publications and major newspapers, as they relate to disparate responses to Covid-19.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic; Governmental Responses; Social Contract; Democratic Process; Self-Quarantining; Politicizing; Native Americans; Public-Health Leadership; Malignant; Historic Proportions

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic marks a new health crisis in the 21st century and a worldwide challenge to slow the spread of the virus. As a result, social distancing, self-quarantining, and wearing masks have all created a "new norm," to survive during times of uncertainty. And given the emergence of an unpredictable pandemic, nations worldwide have had to confront the impact of this pandemic. In many cases, there have been questions about whether some governments will do the right thing to save lives and reduce the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19. The inevitable questions about governmental responses lead to an examination of how the U.S. has responded and the impact of the response upon minority populations, especially Black Americans. This book chapter, then, explores the social contract, politics, and Trump in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; we are particularly interested in e publications or newspaper articles that address the impact or lack thereof upon Black Americans. Before describing the methodology and highlighting emergent themes, we begin with a discussion about the social contract. We start with a discussion about the classical concepts of the social contract and move toward a more contemporary definition. We then use a more contemporary definition to explore Trump's response or lack thereof to COVID-19 to advance his political agenda in the context of the social contract.

History of the Social Contract

The social contract has a long history in philosophy, criminology, and political science. The most prominent discourse on this concept was provided by Rousseau in his manuscript titled "The Social Contract", written in 1762. Rousseau's social contract involved transforming the selfish nature of humanity into a virtuous state characterized by "...patriotism, public spiritedness, and a love of equality (Rosen, 2000)". Rousseau's theory addressed shortcomings he saw in the social contract theories of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704). In Hobbes' Leviathan (1651) humans are portrayed as brutish and selfish. During COVID-19, Hobbes would argue that people are more fearful of losing their lives than the breakdown of the economy. So, despite government's effort to re-open schools, restaurants and other businesses, the Leviathan's sole responsibility is to protect the people. Otherwise, the threat of the virus, along with the threat people impose upon one another would increase the risk of deaths in the absence of an effective government. Locke's view of humanity was more moderate as he believed humans were endowed with natural rights by a divine authority. Further, Locke's social contract derives its legitimacy from the will of the people since the institutions of the sovereign are elected through a democratic process, as in the election of President Donald Trump.

The new social contract. Social contract theory has gone through many iterations since Hobbes and Locke. The social contract, that we develop here for purposes of this chapter builds upon historical precedents and provides a contemporary framework from which to explore the Trump's or the government's response to Covid-19 or lack thereof and its implications upon Black Americans. Specifically, we define the social contract as a voluntary agreement between the government and those governed. In other words, the government has a responsibility to ensure the well-being of all the people, not just special interests. This social contract (as outlined above) is implied in the U.S. Constitution, and it dates to the 18th century, and follows criteria set forth by Locke in that a just government must be created to protect the rights of all the people. This social contract is based upon four inter-related principles: law, morality, ethics, and virtue.

The first principle, law - suggests a set of rules that determine the rights and responsibilities of both parties involved in the social contract. In the second principle, morality - there is a higher standard based on the law. This principle requires that the laws be evenly applied and that they are enacted to achieve a beneficial outcome for all. In the third principle, ethics - the social contract, states that the benefits of the law and morality must be equally shared across all constituents. The government should do no harm to innocent parties, nor the under privileged. In this regard, the principle of ethics is closely related to the notion of justice. Finally, the principle of virtue suggests another reason that extends beyond maintaining an orderly society. The social contract, then, is designed to improve the lives of the governed, and not to simply maintain a status quo. Having established a working definition of the social contract, we provide information about the method of analysis.

Method of Analysis

The data for this study were obtained from the Internet and based articles or short vignettes about former President Trump and Covid 19.

Developing the sample

In developing the sample, we searched the Internet with the following key word: Trump and Covid-19. We identified initially 81, but 26 were not relevant and eliminated. As such, we identified and used identified 55 articles and or essays on the Internet. After which, we would read for content to determine whether the article or essay might be relevant to our topic. With these 55 articles and or essays, we looked for themes in each and then relied upon thematic content analysis. It should also be noted that analytic induction aided in the identification of emergent themes. As such, in this book chapter, five major themes are discussed. These themes are selected because they appear with the greatest frequency in our review of the e articles on the Internet. The examination of articles occurred from March 2020 to October 2020. Throughout, our theoretical problem was Trump's impact,

his violation of the social contract and ultimately, the impact of his handling of the virus upon all people, especially Black Americans. We begin with a cursory discussion about the social contract and exploration of themes.

Violations of the social contract: where is the virtue?

In this section, we identify five violations of the social contract, beginning with Trump's refusal to fully inform the American people about the threat of COVID-19; second, that he lied to the American people about the virus; third, that his mix messaging was detrimental to the American people; and fourth, that he worked hard to compromise the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

Refusal to Inform the American People

According to The Guardian, Donald Trump was warned by top advisors in January 2020 that the coronavirus had the potential to kill "hundreds of thousands of Americans and to derail the U.S. economy, unless tough actions were taken immediately." Yet, it took six weeks before President Trump acted upon the memo. This memo authored by Trump's economic adviser, Peter Navarro, provides evidence that when White House officials were sounding the alarms by late January, President Donald J. Trump was downplaying the threat of COVID-19. In another example, President Trump downplayed the spread of the virus in one of his first public statements on CNBC. During this interview, Trump said that he was not concerned about the virus, maintaining that "It's going to be just fine" and that "we have it under control" Leonhardt [1]. To buttress this observation, an investigation by the New York Times has also revealed that experts and administration officials "warned Trump of the serious nature of the coronavirus pandemic early on". And that these alerts "from high-ranking government experts began as far back as January, six weeks before his administration finally sprang into action on March 16, when he issued concrete guidelines for the public" Romano, Aja [2].

Trump Lies to The American People

In a February 2020 interview with Trish Regan of Fox Business, Trump maintained that the virus would "miraculously go away." We assert that Trump was not interested in the threat of this global virus - what mattered to him were stock market indexes and politics. This observation is confirmed by another article in the New York Times, where with a spreading pandemic, forcing economies around the world to shut down Trump was obsessed with Wall Street Enrich and Phillips [3]. In another example of the lies told to the American people, President Donald Trump, accused his opponents of "politicizing" or lying about the deadly coronavirus during a campaign rally; he told a crowd in North Charleston, South Carolina that the outbreak was another "new hoax" created by the Democrats (Egan, Lauren. February 28, 2020). In addition, The Atlantic has published a long list of the ways Trump has lied about the novel coronavirus. Trump has

said, for example, the coronavirus would weaken “when we get into April, in the warmer weather Paz, Christian [4]. Trump has suggested that the Obama administration stymied his efforts to respond to Covid-19. The truth according to the Atlantic is that the Trump White House relaxed the guidelines for testing that had already been proposed by then President Obama. As another example, on March 31, President Trump said, “We have stopped all of Europe with a travel ban” Paz, Christian [4]. when a closer review of this ban revealed that it was limited to a few specific countries. specific, not all European countries Breunginger Kevin & Christina Wilkie [5]. President Trump has repeatedly lied to the American people about one of gravest public health threats since polio.

Mixed Messaging

Trump’s violation of the social contract in this instance is reflected in his mixed messaging. In April 2020, for example, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), advised everyone to wear masks to save lives, Trump as leader of the country, with rare exception refused to do so. Next, with public health officials recommending that everyone wear a mask and engage in social distancing, President Trump (during April 2020) reminded a television viewing audience that mask wearing was voluntary. He said: “I don’t think I’m going to be doing it” Bennett Brian [6]. As a result of his mixed messaging over ten million citizens have been infected with the COVID-19 virus. According to Time Magazine, Trump has repeatedly said the federal government is here to support the states in response to the pandemic, while at the same time blaming some state governors for not being prepared enough Shammass Brittany [7]. Trump’s mixed messaging can also be seen in his decisions to start campaigning in enclosed areas, with large crowds, with little or no regard for the wearing of mask or social distancing. Once more, we view his lack of leadership as an abandonment of concerns about the livelihood of others, that is, the social contract, with only one concern, his re-election.

Compromising The CDC

In another violation of the social contract, we point toward an disconnect and dissonance between the Trump Administration and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), during his presidency. Donald J. Trump did not want the CDC directly involved, in the decision-making process Shammass Brittany [7]. As an example, the CDC rarely had a presence in daily news briefings from the White House This blatant disregard for the CDC is reflected in an article in The New York Times (May 7, 2020), where Trump and “White House...officials rejected CDC recommendations over concerns that they were overly prescriptive, infringed on religious rights and risked further damaging an economy that Mr. Trump was banking on to recover quickly” Shammass Brittany [7]. Trump’s stifling of the CDC has prompted the following statement by a National Public Radio (NPR) spokesperson; the spokesperson says: “the gold standard for global disease detection and control” has devolved into an “ineffective and nominal adviser” on the U.S.

response to a disease that poses a public health threat of historic proportions” Goodnough Abby & Maggie Haberman [8]. In another example, the NPR states, that Trump “chipped away at the CDC’s capacity to combat infectious diseases” by reducing CDC staff in China. This resulted in an intelligence vacuum insofar as the novel coronavirus is concerned. Chappell Bill [9]. More to the point, the Trump administration has established a pattern of sidelining science, during a catastrophic health scare that has resulted in the loss of over 290,000 lives in the United States, many of these disproportionately poor and people of color. Restated, one can argue that Trump was not interested in the loss of lives that would result from the pandemic.

Impact Upon Black Americans

It is interesting that there are so many contradictions in the Trump presidency with respect to African Americans. In the broader context, Trump claims to be the Abraham Lincoln and the savior of African Americans, he frequently asserts that no one has done more for the African American community. In an article/essay by Rayman & Gilbert [10], the authors assert that “over 90 percent of Black owned small business that applied for PPP funding were denied.” Trump’s denial had a major impact upon 45 percent of these black owned businesses. In another example, The NYTimes reports “Rather than address public concerns about the federal government’s role in the pandemic, Trump has doled out daily doses of racism, hoping to keep the subject out of headlines.” From the New York Times Haberman [11], the point is made that his “remarks are part of a pattern. Almost every day in the last two weeks, Mr. Trump has sought to stoke White fear and resentment, portraying himself as a protector of an old order that polls show much of America believes perpetuates entrenched racism.”

At some point during the campaign, Trump suggested that he was reviewing a fair housing regulation aimed at eliminating racial housing disparities in the suburbs- a play to white suburbanites whose votes would be crucial to his re-election. The point to be made here is that this theme illustrates how Trump has responded to the coronavirus virus; it was his way of distorting or distracting attention away from his malfeasance by focusing on White power instead of meeting the needs of people color who were dying at disproportionate rates. Another article appearing in The Atlantic titled, “The Coronavirus Was an Emergency Until Trump Found Out Who Was Dying” is a poignant example of this fifth theme. The author makes the point that through the vision of Donald Trump, “the pandemic has introduced a new clause to the racial contract. The lives of disproportionately black and brown workers would be sacrificed to fuel the engine of a faltering economy, by a president who disdains people of color. This would be called the COVID contract.” These examples inductively lifted from e articles and on the Internet result in the identification of five themes or acts that violate the social contract. Instead of “doing the right thing” and rather than mobilizing the federal government to provide widespread testing and contact tracing, and coordinating aide to

desperate states, Trump has not only politicized the need to wear the mask; he has also peddled quack cures, spouted conspiracy theories, and attacked anyone with the “temerity to note his ineptitude” Zaldivar Michael, et al. [12]. The net effect of his mix messaging, his compromising the CDC, his lies, has also taken on all people, but especially Black Americans [13-20].

Discussion

Here we explore President Trump’s behavior through our modified notion of the social contract and our enumeration of his violation of the social contract. Instead of ensuring the welfare of the people, Trump’s conduct reflected “malignant” narcissism. The President’s attitude has been cavaliering; he has not been truthful, and he has discounted the importance of science. It can also be asserted that Trump has put his political fortunes ahead of the country, especially people of color. In many ways, he has demonstrated a disregard of medical advice that had it been followed would have significantly mitigated mortality rates. In fact, data from John Hopkins University – School of Medicine revealed that as of December 9, 2020, over 290,000 Americans have lost their lives to the pandemic. In fact, a closer look at the data reveals that Blacks comprise 13% of the nation’s population, Black Americans comprise 21 percent of all the coronavirus deaths. According to The New York Times, “the pandemic has proved to be the worst health crisis in modern history, and the inadequate response by Donald Trump and his administration has resulted in substantial health and economic ramifications that have been particularly devastating for the Black community” [21-25].

With the social contract in mind, Trump could have used the bully pulpit of his office to educate, to inform and to mobilize governmental resources. In attempting to understand Trump’s departure from the social contract, critics observe that Trump’s presidency by its very design has been dedicated to destroying government, that is, the social contract along with his commitment to people of color (Risen, James. April 22, 2020). We agree with philosopher Charles Mills that the social contract – with all its short comings during the presidency of Donald Trump has resulted in greater marginalization for people of color during the pandemic; this includes African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans. as evidenced by data made available by NPR. See for example, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/09/23/914427907/as-pandemic-deaths-add-up-racial-disparities-persist-and-in-some-cases-worsen#states>.

Conclusion

To reiterate an earlier point, once more in 2016, Trump asked Black Americans the following question: “What do you have to lose, by voting for him. And on the campaign trail and before the election results, he has claimed to be the least racist person ever, but his negligence and mixed messaging during the pandemic and

even as the nation awaits the vaccine in a few weeks, confirms that he is responsible for the deaths of many American citizens, and a disproportionate number happen to be African Americans. A remedy for President Trump’s politically motivated and narcissistic responses to COVID-19 is what virtue ethicists would stress is the importance of doing the right thing, in the right place, at the right time, in the right way doing so requires embracing the tenets of the social contract: morality, ethics and virtue. We assert that a virtuous response, that is, one that honors the principles of the social contract, would abide by the law. Second, that the response would be moral in that it would be concerned about the well-being of all segments of the population.

Third, the virtuous response would be an ethical one. In other words, scientific advice would supplant political considerations. Fourth, the virtuous response would include adherence to the noblest features of humanity. Unfortunately, the response to date to the COVID-19 pandemic by Trump has lacked these key principles, related to the social contract. These actions by Trump present a violation of a moral obligation in which he would be expected to put the interests of the people before his own. Concluding comment. This chapter was written to describe the damage done by President Donald Trump with respect to the social contract. We assert that he has demonstrated a failure of moral and public-health leadership from the very beginning. We are also hopeful that the realities of Trump’s presidency, his narcissism and violation of the social contract should force the legislative branch to re-evaluate of the role of government and ownership of manifest problems at the local level, behind his decision making, we suggest it represents a threat to the U.S. Constitution and democracy.

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