The coronavirus changes the terms of political debate

By Jennifer Rubin

April 29, 2020 at 9:30 a.m. EDT

The coronavirus that has afflicted at least a million Americans and killed nearly 60,000 has changed the fundamental terms of the political debate, at least in the short run. The latest USA Today/Suffolk University poll shows “50 percent saying that so far there has been too little federal government involvement in the health aspect of the pandemic, 33 percent saying the involvement has been appropriate and 11 percent saying there has been too much government involvement.” In addition, “Forty-five percent of voters fault the government’s response to the economic fallout from coronavirus as not enough; 36 percent said it has been adequate; and 10 percent said there has been too much government involvement.” And finally, 50 percent of voters polled said they want government to do more to solve problems, compared with 40 percent who said they did not.

In short, the party that likes government, knows how to use government and wants to use government to solve problems has the advantage right now. And sure enough, the Democratic Party has a much better approval rating (41/46) than does the Republican Party (37/51), as does the presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden (44/44) over President Trump (39/55).

It is hardly surprising that in a crisis which only government has the resources and power to combat, trust and reliance in government should go up even if the current Oval Office holder is an incompetent bumbler. (“52 percent said they disapproved of President Donald Trump’s response to the pandemic, while 45 percent said they approved.” His overall job approval is a rotten 43/53, and his decision to cut off funding for the World Health Organization has a 53 disapproval, 38 percent approval.)

The results of the newest NPR-PBS NewsHour-Marist poll are quite similar. “Overall, 44% of Americans approve of the job President Trump is doing in handling coronavirus. That roughly reflects his overall approval rating in past polls, but his disapproval rating jumped six points in the past month, from 49% to 55%.” In addition, Americans prefer Biden over Trump to handle the coronavirus (55 percent to 40 percent) and the economy (51 percent to 44 percent).

Democrats who made the midterm elections largely about health care and the Trump administration’s attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act would be wise to keep the focus right there, along with the administration’s handling of the pandemic. Biden and his fellow Democrats cannot repeat often enough: In the middle of a pandemic, Trump is in court to repeal the entire ACA.
In her video endorsement of Biden, Hillary Clinton said, “Joe Biden has been preparing for this moment his entire life.” In this case, this is not mere hyperbole. He has spent virtually his entire adult life in political office in Washington — first in the Senate and then as vice president. If you want someone entirely familiar with government, willing to expand it to meet the moment and with the relationships to pull it off, you would be hard-pressed to find someone better suited than Biden (which is why progressives’ angst about Biden is so misplaced). So long as things were going smoothly, having a chief executive who just played a president on TV, as Clinton put it, was adequate for many voters. Now, it is figuratively a death sentence.

Several points deserve emphasis. First, the reflexive anti-government animus of the right (e.g., Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s aversion to aid for states and cities) is a loser these days and will aggravate the GOP’s problems. Republicans laughably now citing fear of the debt (after a $2 trillion tax cut!) as an excuse to slow down federal spending will likewise backfire. Second, the perception that government is being used for the benefit of big business, for the well-connected and for Trump cronies will be deadly for Republicans. Their foot-dragging on oversight is further evidence of their unwillingness to use government for the common good. Third, there is a reason so many anti-Trump ads do nothing but quote him or run sound bites. He is a living, breathing advertisement for his own ejection from office. His inanities and gaffes exemplify the dangers of leaving in power someone who does not know or care to know the facts.

Democrats by no means have the election in the bag. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine a playing field more definitively tilted in their favor.