

#HimNotYou: The Politics of Trump's Selfishness



Every day, reporting sheds new light on President Trump's disastrous mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent economic crisis. These failures, born of Trump's incompetence and bottomless narcissism, are no longer surprising to anyone. What is less obvious for many voters, however, is the direct harm that his selfish mismanagement has caused *to them*.

If you follow politics closely, this inability by voters to connect the dots may strike you as surprising. But Third Way's research shows that while Trump's selfishness is obvious, the impact on voters' lives is not.

As part of our extensive study of suburban swing voters, we worked with Avalanche Strategy to survey 3,474 respondents. In an open-ended question, 40% of undecideds and 60% of those leaning toward Biden said that Trump's vision is self-serving and divisive. Yet this conclusion did not necessarily impact their voting choice, because they were not sure it mattered in their lives. As we note in our write-up of the study:

When we dug in with these suburban voters on who they think Trump's vision hurts or helps, many undecided and Biden-leaning voters volunteered that Trump's vision hurts all Americans, but Democrats have work to do to make this harm resonate as personal to voters. Nearly half of undecided voters volunteer that Trump's vision hurts all of us (30%) or the working and middle class (16%). Among Biden leaners, 57% say Trump's vision hurts all of us (42%) or the working and middle class (15%).

Voters know that Trump cares only about himself. What many don't know is why they should care. Democrats must tell them, with clear and simple examples like these:

The Pandemic

HIM: *Trump is selling the fantasy that COVID-19 will 'magically disappear' because he thinks it will boost his poll numbers and the stock market.*

The president has insisted since early February that the virus is a "Democratic hoax" that will just go away on its own. He thinks that by disregarding safety measures, he has a better story to tell voters and that it will reassure investors. Now, he has barred the CDC from reporting or making public the numbers of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths.

YOU: *The virus is raging out of control. Because of Trump's self-serving fiction about it going away on its own, his Administration has no plan to stop it, putting every American in physical danger.*

Trump's response has been the worst in the world, with the US seeing the most cases and most deaths overall of any nation on earth. As of mid-July, COVID-19 had killed more than 140,000 Americans and sickened 3.5 million.

Testing

HIM: *Trump told his team to slow down testing so the number of cases would seem lower.*

President Trump has ordered that coronavirus testing be slowed down, even proposing to cut federal testing funding as cases were increasing exponentially. He believes (bizarrely) that more testing means more cases, and more cases is bad for him politically.

YOU: *Trump's self-serving testing slowdown is costing thousands of American lives and millions of jobs.*

The only way to battle a pandemic and safely reopen the economy is by ensuring that testing is widely available, rapid, and accurate. In the US, it's none of those things, because the president never wanted it to be.

Masks

HIM: *Trump largely has refused to wear a mask until very recently, believing that it makes him look weak and signals that the pandemic is out of control.*

Trump has politicized mask-wearing. He even refused to wear a mask while visiting a mask factory and when he recently hosted a group of Pennsylvania Little Leaguers to the White House.

YOU: *Trump's politicization of masks – and his refusal to lead by wearing one – has made the pandemic more dangerous for everyone.*

Trump's own CDC Director has said that the virus could be brought under control in 4-8 weeks if everyone wore a mask. But the president's rejection of the science has led to widespread resistance to mask laws and has emboldened state-level supporters, like Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, to forbid localities from enforcing them.

Public Events

HIM: *Trump still wanted to carry on with his ego-stroking rallies but bowed to reality when local authorities began to balk.*

Trump has already held a series of large public events, ordered up a rally and fireworks display at Mt. Rushmore, removed public safety measures at his Tulsa rally, and insisted on a large crowd for his convention until he received public pushback from Florida authorities.

YOU: *Trump's ego rallies have made you less safe. They have jeopardized audience members and many others. They also promoted the dangerous idea that the coronavirus is a hoax that can be ignored.*

These events, before mostly un-masked audiences, have endangered not only the attendees but everyone in their communities. Even the Governor of Oklahoma tested positive after the Tulsa event.

Schools

HIM: *Trump is demanding that schools reopen with few safety protocols, because he believes that will help him politically.*

Trump has threatened to withhold federal aid from schools that do not reopen, and he pressured the CDC to loosen guidelines for school reopening. Now, Trump and congressional Republicans are conditioning aid to desperate state and local governments on their agreement to open schools, regardless of the risk to children, staff, and their communities.

YOU: *Trump's self-serving threats against schools endanger children, their parents and caregivers, school employees, and entire communities.*

Several large school districts have already announced plans to remain closed despite the risk of funding cuts, because “the skyrocketing infection rates of the past few weeks make it clear the pandemic is not under control.” An Arizona teacher died after contracting the virus while teaching summer school.

Voting

HIM: *Trump believes that mail-in voting is bad for his electoral prospects, so he’s spreading lies to try to stop it.*

Trump claims that voting by mail will lead to a “rigged” election that will benefit his opponents. He has peddled a variety of increasingly bizarre conspiracy theories about how this would work. None of them are true.

YOU: *Trump’s self-serving political gambit to cast doubt about mail-in voting will make it far more dangerous everyone to vote.*

Trump’s claims will discourage many from voting absentee, causing more in-person voting, where 60% of poll workers are seniors. There is absolutely no evidence of systemic bias toward one party in mail-in voting, and the rate of fraud in this process was just 0.0025 percent in the 2016 and 2018 elections. (That’s *at most* 372 possible cases out of 14.6 million votes cast.)

Conclusion

It is incumbent upon everyone working to defeat Trump that we make clear the connection between Trump’s selfishness and their own lives. As we discovered in 2016, voters can conclude that his conduct (like on the “Access Hollywood” tape) might be abhorrent, but it remains irrelevant to their everyday lives. This time, they must understand that his selfishness in the face of a pandemic matters enormously: it is dangerous to them, their families, and their communities.