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Weeks Before Election Day, President Trump Falls Ill With COVID-19

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

In the midst of an already contentious election, President Donald J. Trump announced that he tested positive for COVID-19 via Twitter.

"Tonight, @FLOTUS and I tested positive for COVID-19. We will begin our quarantine and recovery process immediately. We will get through this TOGETHER," Trump said.

With just weeks before election day, both Trump and Biden's campaigns are now left scrambling to figure out what will come of this unforeseen challenge.

Seattle University professor of American history Henry Kamerling specializes in the nineteenth and twentieth century. "I'm struggling to find an example of someone in advance of the election that had fallen ill," Kamerling said.

In the days following the president's diagnosis, three Republican senators also tested positive for COVID-19. Two of those senators may have caught the virus during an open-air event held Sep. 26 at the White House Rose Garden to announce the nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barret for the Supreme Court. As masks were not required for this occasion, several republican lawmakers and staffers who were present have now tested positive for COVID-19.

Former Vice President Joe Biden has tested negative for COVID-19 according to his campaign, but it will still be several days before results are confirmed and conclusive. However, since the first presidential debate held Sept. 29, Biden has reported feeling well.

President Trump was relocated to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland the day after his positive test result. In a filmed message Oct. 2, the president told the public that the move was out of an abundance of caution rather than necessity.

He filmed a video Oct. 4 from the medical center in which he hinted at a planned visit to supporters who had gathered outside the hospital.

"We are gonna pay a little surprise to some of the great patriots that we have out on the street," Trump said. That same day the president was driven around the facility to wave at supporters in an insulated Chevrolet suburban.

While the president's supporters were heartened by the visit, a physician at Walter Reed expressed frustration at his public display on Twitter.



Kim Nucum

“Every single person in the vehicle during that completely unnecessary Presidential ‘drive-by’ just now has to be quarantined for 14 days. They might get sick. They may die. For political theater,” Dr. James Phillips tweeted.

The president’s medical team has issued contradictory statements regarding his health. His personal physician, Dr. Sean Conley, stated that the president received supplemental oxygen Oct 2. and steroids soon after, but has also avoided inquiries about further medical care.

The United States has surpassed the 200,000 COVID-19 death threshold according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. President Trump’s situation places a unique new factor in the last three weeks of the presidential election race, which could impact the result Nov. 3.

In the rise of Trump’s condition, Biden’s campaign team has decided to pull all negative attack ads against the president. In response, the Trump administration and campaign team said they would not be taking away any advertisements against Biden. The decision to keep these ads may have come from the fact that Trump may no longer be allowed to hold large political rallies due to his current health condition.

“The impact that it will have on voters entirely depends on how they interpret the event,” professor of political science Patrick Schoettmer said.

There are several ways that voters could perceive the president’s positive test results.

“If they see this as an extension of an attack on the United States, this could trigger something that we call the rally around the flag effect. That’s the sentiment that when we’re all under threat, we all come together and, in particular, we rally around the person of the president,” Schoettmer said.

Although the rally around the flag effect is possible, the opposite is equally as likely.

“If, however, people see it as an example of his mismanagement of the crisis, then it could be a crystallizing event that pushes those remaining undecided voters toward Biden,” Schoettmer said.

Schoettmer was asked about the possibility of additional social unrest following the election if an unexpected result were to occur. For instance, if the president were to win the electoral college without the popular vote for a second time.

“In the late 19th century, there was also a period where in two out of three elections, a Republican candidate won the Electoral College, but lost the popular vote. In particular, the election between Samuel Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes almost resulted in another Civil War,” Schoettmer said.

While another electoral college victory that diverges from the popular vote is unlikely to occur, the current political climate does threaten to harm the perceived legitimacy of state institutions.

“If we have another one, then that’s going to ratchet up these sentiments of illegitimacy in the system and democracies depend on that sense of legitimacy to function,” Scheottmer said.

Kamerling shares concerns about Americans denying the legitimacy of the election results.

“In some ways, we are really in uncharted water. In some profound ways I feel like the American political fabric is fraying in dramatic ways that give me a great degree of anxiety,” Kamerling said.

He is concerned that informal political rules which govern the conduct of American leaders have been degraded to a degree that could pose a threat to American democracy in November.

“There are formal rules and there’s the political traditions and protocols that govern constitutional democracies in informal ways, and what has really happened since 2016 with the Trump Administration is a very fulsome assault on the customs and traditions that govern American politics,” Kamerling said.

He offered examples of how he views the president’s recent statements about the election as undermining collective trust in the results.

“When Trump goes before the nation and says ‘the elections are rigged, you can’t trust the outcome, and it’s fake news,’ those things assault the core fundamental fabric of the informal political tradition,” Kamerling said.

The president retweeted an exclamation from New York Post personality Miranda Devine, which seeks to lionize the president and uses racist language to describe the COVID-19 virus.

“If the President bounces back onto the campaign trail, he will be an invincible hero, who not only survived every dirty trick the Democrats threw at him, but the Chinese virus as well. He will show America we no longer have to be afraid,” Miranda said.

As the United States moves into the eighth month of the pandemic, the president’s re-election campaign hopes to capitalize on the president’s condition as a sign of his strength as a leader against a foreign menace. The Biden campaign is hoping to frame Trump as the victim of his own lack of seriousness when responding to the pandemic. Which narrative prevails could be the definitive factor in who resides in the Oval Office come January.