

Donald Trump's Governor Problem: Debates on Opening Up the Economy

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Things are getting dizzy in the White House on what, exactly, is being done to “open the economy”. Cranky advocates for the financial argument over the restrictions of public health have been attempting to claw back some ground. As Jonathan Chait [puts it](#), “The anti-public health faction either believes the dangers of the coronavirus have been exaggerated, or that the cost of social-distancing requirements is so high that the economy should simply be opened, regardless of medical danger.”

Officials such as US **Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin** and White House economic advisor **Larry Kudlow** have been busy pushing the line that the shuttered economy will be opened come May. In Mnuchin's [words](#), “As soon as the president feels comfortable with the medical issues, we are making everything necessary that American companies and American workers can be open for business and that they have the liquidity they need to operate the business in the interim.” On the Fox Business Network, Kudlow [outlined his views](#). “Our intent here was, is, to try to relieve people of the enormous difficult hardships they are suffering through no fault of their own.”

The economy-before-health group, which also consists of **Ivanka Trump** and her husband **Jared Kushner**, has never had much time for the medical arguments. In the [views](#) of a senior administration official, “They already know what they want to do and they're looking for ways to do it.”

What, then, could be done to remove the shutters? **President Donald Trump** initially felt enough confidence to claim the broadest of powers on the subject, bypassing states and their authority to manage and ease the coronavirus lockdowns. “The authority of the president of the United States having to do with the subject we are talking about is total,” [he explained](#) at a White House press conference early last week. “I have the ultimate authority.”

He tantalised those gathered with promises of a written paper on the subject, though felt it unnecessary “because the governors need us one way or the other because, ultimately, it comes with the federal government.”

On April 14, Trump [took aim](#) at his most favourite of hobby horses – the “Fake News Media” – for claiming “that it is the Governors decision to open up the states, not that of the President of the United States & the Federal Government. Let it be fully understood that this is incorrect.” Legal authorities such as Steve Vladeck of the University of Texas in Austin [disagree](#): “the president has no formal legal authority to categorically override local or state shelter-in-place orders or to reopen schools and small businesses.”

After his initial imputation of such vast constitutional powers, Trump felt that it was all up to the governors in any case. He called testing for COVID-19 “a local thing”, feeling that State officials were showing little or no initiative in using commercial labs.

Things are certainly not rosy, let alone coordinated, between the White House and the governors. Criticism of the president’s uneven and tardy response has earned rebuke and mocking. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer became “Gretchen ‘Half’ Whitmer”; Washington Governor Jay Inslee was lashed by comments of being a “failed presidential candidate who was “constantly chirping”. As Trump has [explained](#) with a note of tartness to Vice President Mike Pence, “If they don’t treat you right, I don’t call.” Even during times of high crisis, the president luxuriates in adolescent petulance.

In certain states, there has been a rash of protests against quarantine regimes. Trump, ever the tease, has thrown in his lot with them, tweeting messages of “liberation” for Minnesota, Michigan and Virginia, all led by Democratic governors. Michigan, in particular, has one of the firmest quarantine regimes in the country, measures which have spawned such groups of disgruntlement as the Michiganders Against Excessive Quarantine.

The April 15 protest, which featured a gathering outside the Michigan State Capitol, was held with a daring impertinence, with participants fobbing off anything related to physical distancing rules. Four Michigan residents have also decided to throw the law book at the governor, with legal proceedings claiming that the “Stay Home, Stay Safe” executive order is in violation of their constitutional rights. The attorney responsible for filing the suit, one David Helm, [argues](#) that Whitmer’s initial executive order passed muster in targeting “the specific needs of the crises”; the second, issued on April 9, was “unreasonable” and an act of executive over stretch.

The White House has [suggested a strategy](#) to the 50 governors, one involving three phases. Phase one continues to feature social distancing in public, the isolation of vulnerable individuals, socialising in small groups and minimising “non-essential travel”. Bars are to remain closed, but gyms can open on the proviso of observing “strict physical distancing and sanitation protocols”. Phase Two keeps vulnerable individuals in shelter, increases the number of individuals who can gather in social settings (from 10 to 50) and permits non-essential travel. The continuation of telework where feasible and keeping common areas where workers might gather closed also feature. The final phase permits vulnerable individuals to resume public interactions, though low-risk populations should still exercise caution in spending time “in crowded environments” and the resumption of “unrestricted staffing of worksites”.

But confusion reigns, exemplified by [the remarks](#) made by New York **Governor Andrew Cuomo**. “Open what, open it when, and open it how?” Trump continues to play – loudly – to his political base, indulging bouts of pageantry even as he mocks the methods of the States. In responding to Trump’s tweets of support for the protestors, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz [tried to get some clarification](#). “I called to ask, what are we doing differently about moving towards getting as many people back into the workforce without compromising the health of Minnesotans or the providers?” No reply was forthcoming. And that, to a governor who has not, as [Walz described it](#), “had open clashes with the administration.”

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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