

Protesting for the Right to Catch the Coronavirus

 [nytimes.com/2020/04/19/opinion/coronavirus-trump-protests.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/19/opinion/coronavirus-trump-protests.html)

At a string of small “reopen America” protests across the country this week, mask-less citizens proudly flouted social distancing guidance while openly carrying semiautomatic rifles and waving American flags and signs with “ironic” swastikas. They organized chants to lock up female Democrat governors and to fire the country’s top infectious disease experts. At one point during protests at the Michigan Capitol, the group’s orchestrated gridlock blocked an ambulance en route to a nearby hospital.

For those who’ve chosen to put their trust in science during the pandemic it’s hard to fathom the decision to gather to protest while a deadly viral pathogen — transmitted easily by close contact and spread by symptomatic and asymptomatic people alike — ravages the country. But it shouldn’t come as a surprise. This week’s public displays of defiance — a march for the freedom to be infected — are the logical conclusion of the modern far-right’s donor-funded, shock jock-led liberty movement. It was always headed here.

Few demonstrate this movement better than Alex Jones of Infowars — one of the key figures of Saturday’s “You Can’t Close America” rally on the steps of the Capitol building in Austin, Tex. For decades, Mr. Jones has built a thriving media empire harnessing (real and understandable) fear, paranoia and rage, which in turn drive sales of vitamin supplements and prepper gear in his personal store. The Infowars strategy is simple: Instill a deep distrust in all authority, while promoting a seductive, conspiratorial alternate reality in which Mr. Jones, via his outlandish conspiracies, has all the answers. He’s earned the trust of a non-trivial number of Americans, and used it to stoke his ego and his bank account. And he never lets reality get in the way (case in point, holding a stay-at-home order protest in Texas the day after the state announced it would begin efforts to carefully reopen in coming weeks).

Former employees have described Mr. Jones to me as master of manipulating the truth into a convenient worldview in which Infowars and its listeners are constantly victimized by powerful institutional forces. “We kept saying ‘We’re the underdogs’ — that was our mantra,” one former employee told me in 2017. To make this work, Mr. Jones molds the day’s news into conspiratorial fables.

A novel virus — about which so much is unknown and where expert opinion is constantly shifting — is a near perfect subject for Infowars to fit the news to its paranoid narrative. Uncertainty over the virus’s origins in China is a springboard to float unproven theories about bioweapons. Discussions about a vaccine to end the epidemic become conspiracies about billionaire tech leaders pushing population control. Changing epidemiological models that show fewer projected Covid-19 deaths (because social distancing has worked to slow infections) provide an opening for Mr. Jones to rant about

stay-at-home lockdowns. Genuine fears about deeply unfair job losses and economic recession become reckless theories about Democrat-led plans to punish American citizens by driving them into poverty.

Jones' opportunistic rantings fit neatly into a larger right-wing strategy, which has grown alongside Infowars. Just as Infowars rallies are tied to the media outlet's financial interest in antigovernment paranoia, a few of this week's rallies have been underwritten by political organizations with ties to the Republican Party and the Trump administration. Regardless of who's behind them, the intent is to sow division and attempt to reshape public opinion. As Vox's [Jane Coaston wrote](#), they're "designed to pit Republican-voting areas of states against their Democratic-voting neighbors, even [rural Republicans against urban Republicans](#)."

It's important to note that the reopen protests have been generally small (at most, hundreds of people in states of millions of citizens responsibly staying at home) and [don't even reflect the polled opinions](#) of many conservatives. But they fit neatly into a larger campaign playbook and take on outsize importance. They take place frequently in swing states or states with Democratic governors and are plastered across social media, reported in mainstream organizations, openly cheered on by Fox News and right-wing media, and ultimately end up amplified (tacitly or explicitly) by the president. The strategy has worked well in recent years, consolidating support among the Trump base.

As a political movement, the Make America Great Again crowd relishes turning criticism from ideological opponents into a badge of honor. Confrontation of any kind is currency and people taking offense to their actions is a surefire sign that they're correct. The MAGA mind-set prioritizes freedom above all — especially the freedom from introspection, apologizing or ever admitting defeat. But the movement, which has been building since the Tea Party protests, has created a reflexive response among both Jones's audience and far-right Trump supporters.

This response is disguised as an expression of liberty, but it's a twisted, paranoid and racialized version. Slate editor Tom Scocca [defined it recently](#) as a political ideology where supporters are "conditioned to believe that thinking about other people's needs or interests in any way is tyranny by definition." This wholesale rejection of collective thinking is, [as Vice's Anna Merlan notes](#), the cornerstone of the anti-vaccine and "health freedom" movements, which reject public health because they "don't think their choices affect other people."

Unmentioned by the protesters are the workers actually keeping America open, many of them afraid for their health, [with no choice and in communities devastated by the virus](#). The result, as my Times [colleagues described Saturday](#), is "images of nearly all-white protesters demanding the governor relax restrictions while hoisting Trump signs and Confederate battle flags, as the virus disproportionately impacts Michigan's black residents."

This coronavirus protest movement is merely the confluence of this perverted liberty ideology — honed and pushed by Mr. Jones, right-wing interest groups and pro-Trump media — and the dynamics of an online information ecosystem that prioritizes conflict to generate attention. When Infowars-style tactics meet online platforms the result is a flattening of all nuanced arguments of science and politics into a simplified struggle between patriots and tyrants. Small protests incorrectly blossom into a false national narrative.

And so here we are in 2020, protesting statewide lockdowns intended to save lives while thousands of Americans across the country grow sick and die each day. That a virus that demands a united front — where our public health is only as strong as our least vigilant citizens — should come at a moment of extreme polarization is a tragedy. But this moment is what we've been headed toward for years. And so the "reopen America" protests feel unconscionable and yet completely predictable. The playbook isn't new. The only thing that's changed are the stakes, which get higher every day.