

OPINION

# Opinion: Virus provides lessons on government, science and politics

Joseph P. Tomain, Opinion contributor Published 9:20 a.m. ET April 13, 2020



Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine signs an order banning groups of 100 or more people, along with Dr. Amy Acton, left, the head of the Ohio Department of Health, during a press conference updating the public on COVID-19 on Thursday, March 12, 2020 in Columbus, Ohio. A fifth case of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, was confirmed in Ohio earlier Thursday. (Doral Chenoweth/The Columbus Dispatch via AP) (Photo: Doral Chenoweth/The Columbus Dispatch)

Even in the midst of concern, maybe even confusion, about the novel coronavirus, the pandemic has already provided important lessons about our government and our politics.

One of life's lessons that we have all learned, most likely from our mothers, is that it is better to be safe than sorry. That bit of folk wisdom has been embedded in environmental law for about three decades, where it is known as the precautionary principle. Briefly, that principle can be explained this way: "Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation."

To be sure, the principal has its advocates and critics, and, unsurprisingly, it has been highly politicized. However, the principle is not new, and it is embedded in many of the laws we use to regulate potential hazards. Most significantly for today and our concerns about coronavirus are food and drug laws.

Before a new drug or medical device is placed on the market, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tests it to determine if it is safe and effective for human consumption and use. This commonsense test is intentionally cautious and is another version of the precautionary principle. The AIDS era of the 1980s and '90s tested the precautionary principle as persons faced with life-threatening diseases wanted to forgo precaution and risk by taking unproven drugs that they hoped would save their lives. The FDA responded in part by revising its rules to allow for expedited review in some instances. Nevertheless, it retained its "safe and efficacious" standards.

Precaution, though, comes in different varieties. During the AIDS epidemic, the federal government used precaution even as it put new drugs on the market. In the near future, we may also need the FDA to exercise its expertise and caution when coronavirus vaccines and other drugs become available.



**Laboratory Technologist Roger Knauf, left, and Sarah Dell, test for COVID-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus at Gravity Diagnostics in Covington, Kentucky Tuesday, March 24, 2020. The work is conducted in a secure area and the actual test is done behind glass. The lab was founded in 2016 and was approved for COVID-19 testing on March 16. The CEO is Tony Remington. (Photo: Liz Dufour/The Enquirer)**

Yet there is another type of caution that we have witnessed over the past few weeks. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health, and state and local governments, including Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, asked citizens to take precaution and act, even though there's much about the virus we do not yet know.

We were asked to engage in social distancing; our bars, restaurants, and other businesses were closed; even our arts and sporting events were canceled. Many of us have taken the precautions seriously, as well we should, even in the face of scientific uncertainty. Instead of politics, we turn to medical science to guide us in the face of irreversible damage.

Our government is and ought to be a two-way street. In one direction, as voters, we direct our government about how to address, and hopefully solve, the social and economic problems that we face on a daily basis. In the other direction, we look to government to protect us in times of danger. Coronavirus presents exactly that danger. Local, state and some federal agencies have responded and we have listened.

So far, coronavirus has taught us about the role of citizens and their government. First, and importantly, we have learned that we have vibrant and reliable state and local governments, even as the White House dithers about a proper response. Second, and equally important, is that science and expertise should not be politicized. Instead, they are necessary factors upon which we rely for information and, when necessary, for guidance about which actions to take.

*Joseph P. Tomain is dean emeritus and the Wilbert and Helen Ziegler professor of law at the University of Cincinnati College of Law. He is also a scholar at the Center for Progressive Reform.*



**Joseph P. Tomain (Photo: Provided)**

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