

The Third Winter of our Discontent

Following the Science, Political Science or Economic Science?

With attribution to Steinbeck or Shakespeare, February 2022 marks the start of our third year of adjusting our lifestyles and wardrobes to the presence and perils of COVID-19, including the constant admonition for us to “mask up.” Whereas for those of us old enough to remember a mid-twentieth century popular television drama *The Lone Ranger*, featuring Clayton Moore and his trusty Native American—most certainly labeled Indian at that time—sidekick Tonto, played by Jay Silverheels, the familiar and repeated question “Who was that masked man?” applied only to half of this brave duo protecting us from evil. Now it applies to us all (though “man” would have to be changed to “person” or “individual”).

BY ALLEN R. SANDERSON

In addition, our daily conversations, radio and television news programs, and newspaper articles nowadays have peppered our working vocabularies with the likes of lockdowns, mitigations, social distancing, variants, mandates, quarantines, sheltering in place, positivity rates, jabs, and boosters. Plus we’re told that some new edict is the result of a “study” by “experts” who are telling us that they are just “following the science” to “bend the curve” and “slow the spread.” They assure us they are taking everything seriously, as if they were just fooling around in their earlier work. And that they are only taking this last seemingly draconian step “out of an abundance of caution,” the latest phraseology being deployed regularly as we grapple with Delta and Omicron variants.

Yet, without disrespecting any of these assertions or alphabet agencies (FDA, NIH, WHO, NAICD, CDC), one still has to ask: Are they following the science or the political science? What are their incentives when it comes to erring in one direction or the other? In statistical jargon, what are known as paying attention to and weighing Type I and Type II errors. When it comes to drug approval, mandating masks, shutting down restaurants, requiring a vaccination, cancelling sporting events or concerts, or forcing educational institutions into remote learning, being under-cautious obviously comes with risks and costs. But so does, less obviously, over-caution. And the incentives—and an examination and analysis of the historical record of agency actions—strongly indicate that their inherent, built-in bias runs in the direction of “over” rather than “under.” And an abundance of caution will likely include an abundance of costs—on families and firms.

Non-COVID examples of this same quandary include how much inspection of passengers and luggage should the TSA employees engage in at O’Hare? Too little scrutiny entails obvious risks. But so does too much, including long lines and wait times to check in and board, personal privacy concerns, and wasted time and resources.

Raising the Interstate highway speed limit to 75 mph lowers the costs of moving people, products, and produce, but it would also raise the unintended costs and risks of accidents. Should we raise the posted DuSable Lakeshore Drive ceiling to 55 mph—or lower it to 35? Or what about with respect to our elections? Too much red tape and inconveniences discourage voting and turnout; too little call into question the legitimacy of some ballots cast that shouldn’t have been. Both errors raise doubt on the legitimacy of the process and the outcomes.



“Out of an abundance of caution” has implications for any assessment of costs and benefits, and government officials are just like the rest of us. They have personal agendas—what keeps me in office, in power and control, and with a sizable budget?—and will adjust their behavior in light of the incentives they face. And thus we run the risk that the phrase is being used to justify an action or a policy that otherwise has no rational basis, nor is the result of an analysis of its effectiveness or potential negative byproducts or consequences. An abundance of caution can kill too.

Economists may live in a different universe, but in that world live operating principles such as careful attention paid to costs as well as benefits, weighing tradeoffs, decision-making at the margin (that is, no all-or-nothing outcomes, but rather should we have a little bit more or a little bit less), and the belief that people respond purposefully and predictably to incentives.

It is simply not true that one can’t be too careful. □