

Mask Mandates: COVID-19 and the Law of the Instrument

“One day after the state reported a record 92 COVID-19-related deaths,” the *Wisconsin State Journal’s* Mitchell Schmidt reports, “Gov. Tony Evers announced Wednesday he plans to extend the state’s emergency declaration and accompanying mask mandate through mid-January. ... The current mask mandate was issued in July and extended by Evers in September.”

The first two mask mandates didn’t achieve the desired result! Something must be done! Hey, I’ve got an idea! How about another mask mandate?

At first blush this sounds like the old Alcoholics Anonymous definition of insanity: Repeating the same actions and expecting different results.

But there’s more to it than that. Producing a particular result hardly ever explains or justifies a particular government policy very well. Mask mandates aren’t about masks. They’re about mandates.

Evers’s obsession with issuing orders demonstrates Abraham Kaplan’s Law of the Instrument: “Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding.”

The voters of Wisconsin handed Tony Evers the hammer of political authority in 2018. Naturally, he’s swinging that hammer repeatedly and with vigor. Whether he’s hitting nails with it, or just smashing the thumbs of Wisconsin’s people and businesses, is another question.

Keep in mind that the question of whether masks “work” is not the same as the question of whether mask mandates “work,” if by “work” we mean “impede the spread of COVID-19.”

Contrary to the claims of certain bureaucrats wearing lab coats, waving clipboards, and holding themselves out as the spokespersons for “science,” the scientific jury remains very much out on the first question. And those bureaucrats change their stories based on political considerations. Take, for example, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Fauci on masks in May: “There’s no reason to be walking around with a mask. When you’re in the middle of an outbreak, wearing a mask might make people feel a little bit better, and it might even block a droplet. But it’s not providing the perfect protection that people think that it is.”

Fauci on mask mandates and other government orders in November: "Now is the time to do what you're told."

The moral of the story:

If it makes you feel better to wear a mask, wear a mask.

If wearing a mask seems justified by science, or just by common sense, wear a mask.

If a property owner requires masks and you want to use the property, wear a mask.

If the law requires a mask and you'd rather obey it than fight it, wear a mask.

But don't assume that Tony Evers or Anthony Fauci are neutrally "listening to the science." They're not. They're just enthusiastically swinging the hammers they've been given.