

Freedom vs Safety

From seatbelts in the 1990s to face-masks with today's pandemic, governments have tried to implement legislations to protect people. But how far can governments limit liberties to promote common good? The dossier at hand delves into the painful compromise of less freedom for more safety, the noticeable and persistent rebellious stance against measures that can save citizens' lives, and the question of the legitimacy of governments' actions to restrict citizens' freedom against or regardless of their will.

Government-imposed constraints on our freedom make a major difference in keeping us safe (doc.2). From motorcycle helmets and seatbelt laws (doc.1) to tobacco regulations (doc.2), from road safety rules to face masks (doc.4), their efficiency has become undeniable and measures always end up being widely respected (doc.1). If wearing a seatbelt is about individual safety while wearing a mask mainly prevents the spread of coronavirus to others (doc.1), the goal remains the same : protecting the population. Thus, be they ordinary or extraordinary measures (doc.5), public health interventions made at the cost individual freedoms or coming with an economic cost to various economic actors (docs.1&2), are usually accepted in principle (doc.1) yet face reluctance when the risk-benefit balance is not understood.

If most motorists today endorse the measure, in the past, people ignored the risk of being ejected through a windscreen during a crash (doc.4) and angry protesters today still target the mandatory, paternalistic and allegedly arbitrary features of such governmental actions (doc.1). When regulations are constraining, people sometimes rather feel oppressed and dominated by the system (doc.1) rather than see their interest, to the point of rather dying than see their individual freedom eroded through constraints imposed on them by the state (doc.4). It appears difficult to draw an acceptable, fair and efficient line between restriction of freedom and increased safety, especially when it is about protecting others (doc.2) as with face masks (doc.3), and when people lack trust in their governments (doc.1).

It has rapidly emerged from a vocal minority that the mask debate was hinging on the notion of endangered individual liberty and constitutional rights for the sake of a hypothetical common good (doc.3). By objecting to life-saving measures in general, and face masks in particular, protesters actually refuse and resent the authoritarian and

paternalistic violation of their liberties (doc.3), especially when they have not tested positive (doc.5), and when those restrictive measures (lockdown, muzzling of dissenting voices about the virus), threaten their very constitutional rights (doc.5). Protesters oppose whatever interferes with their freedom as an unacceptable infringement, and it is the distinction between mandatory and arbitrary that should lead to redefine freedom (doc.3).

To demonstrate the consequences of the « live-free-or-die-attitude », the cartoon appears as a cautionary tale against politicised objection to mask covering, with the absurdity of being locked up in a coffin while still claiming your constitutional right. As long as there is a straight-forward approach, clear messaging, transparency and accountability, the constraints are not arbitrary, thereby remaining acceptable and endorsed (doc.2).

(499 words)