Spurred on by conservative groups, protesters are demanding that their states go back to business as usual. This sentiment isn't limited to the kinds of hotheads who insist on congregating in public during an epidemic, or even to conservatives like Betsy DeVos who help to fund these groups and promote their protests. It also includes other, more sober, conservative commentators. It's important to understand the reasons for this pushback, which are not unlike the reasons for many of the same commentators' indifference to climate change.

One reason for the pushback is a continued refusal to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, just as with climate change. An example is Bret Stephens, a conservative columnist for the *NY Times* who has downplayed both the threat of the coronavirus and the threat of climate change. In a column published over the weekend, he argued that the virus is really just a New York problem and that the rest of the country should be allowed to go back to work.

We've heard this kind of thing before. You may recall that originally the virus was just a Chinese problem. Then, in Europe, it was just an Italian problem. After that, it was a European problem but not an American problem, so we closed our borders. Now, we're told, it's a New York problem.

At root, this is a failure to understand the potential of epidemics to undergo explosive growth from a small number of cases. Yes, up until now, New York has been the major hotspot. But deaths in New York are going down, while they are steadily rising for the country as a whole. Even areas where cases are growing slowly now are not exempt from risk. The success of various types of lockdown orders in slowing the spread of the disease does not mean that the disease will stay quiet when those orders are removed.

Stephens also attacks a straw man. No one advocates that exactly the same measures have to be taken on the same timetable across the country. Nor does anyone think the country can stay locked down until a vaccine arises in a year or two. For that matter, no one thinks that lockdowns must be pursued at all costs, regardless of consequences. What experts do believe is that we have to get the number of cases low enough, and the number of tests high enough, so we can use contact tracing to limit fresh outbreaks.

Many conservatives are rightfully concerned about the undeniably heavy economic costs of lockdowns. Economic analysis indicates, however, that those costs are presently outweighed by the value of the human lives saved by continuing

lockdowns. This is at least true on a national level, although it's possible that there are some communities where restrictions can be safely eased.

There's also a sense, from a libertarian perspective, that we shouldn't restrict personal liberties for the sake of the community, at least not unless the alternative is catastrophic. That may be behind the eagerness of libertarians like Richard Epstein to reopen, as I've discussed previously. But there seem to be liberty interests on both sides: the liberty of those who would like to escape the lockdown, and the liberty of others to live their lives in safety.

No one is in favor of extending the serious economic pain of the lockdown any longer than necessary. But we shouldn't let ideology get in the way of the facts when making policy decisions of such life-and-death importance.