

Why I Almost Voted for Trump

When I woke up last Saturday, ten days before the 2024 election, I thought I was going to vote Donald Trump. Over my long life, I have never voted for a Republican candidate for President. I have always been a reliable Democratic voter. I have voted for Kamala Harris four times: twice for Attorney General, once for Senator, and once for Vice President. In this year's Senate race, I will vote for Adam Schiff, Mr. Trump's hated adversary. None of that changed when I decided, ten days before the election, to vote for Donald Trump.

One of the standard jokes in politics is, "who the hell are these undecideds?" Depending on where you stand, it should be perfectly obvious which candidate will get your vote. For me, though, as an American citizen, this has been a very difficult election. It is not difficult in the sense that I will be overwrought if my candidate does not win. A Harris term and a Trump term are vastly different outcomes, to be sure. I personally will survive just fine; more importantly, our country will survive. It is never fun to lose an election, of course, which is why Abraham Lincoln said, after losing one, that "it hurts too much to laugh, but we are too big to cry."

I am no political activist, but I do see American citizenship as a serious responsibility which defines, not just our rights, but our duties. Our country is a moral universe of sorts, enabling us to live as more than animals. It obliges us to a shared past and a common future. As Americans, we are in each other's hands, and that makes American citizenship the most important thing about us. At least, that is how I see it.

During this 2024 campaign season, I have watched with frustration as President Biden, and then Vice President Harris, gave canned responses to Republican challenges on the economy and immigration policy. Franklin Roosevelt never hesitated to provide Americans with complex macroeconomic explanations. He trusted Americans to be smart enough to see the big picture. Most Democratic leaders and operatives no longer seem to have that baseline faith.

For me, this is a deal breaker. The idea that electing Mr. Trump spells the end of democracy in America is false. *Americans* are the check-and-balance to the tyrannical aspiration of our leaders. The people who regard us as sheep, unable to think for ourselves, do not know us. Whether Left, Right, or Center, Americans are smart, and I do not know why it became the received wisdom to think otherwise. We are a free people, and democracy—our right to a coequal voice in the government that has coercive authority over us—is our *first* freedom.

When Founders said that "all men are created equal," they meant that government shall govern with the consent of the governed. Democracy has been a constant throughout our civic heritage, even during the existential moments, such as the Civil War and World War II. Democracy in America is *not* ending if Trump is elected. It may become more oligarchic, but *that* ship has been sailing since the days of Ronald Reagan. Is Donald Trump a friend of American democracy? Is he a friend of the Constitution? *Those* things (the Constitution and our democracy) are increasingly different, and *that* is a big part of the problem.

Republicans generally have *not* been friendly to democracy. They have systematically gerrymandered districts so that elected officials do not represent the popular will. They have tried to suppress the votes of urban Americans, as though there were something suspicious about

precincts with 250,000 voters rather than 2,500 voters. And, following Mr. Trump's lead, they have baselessly challenged the results of elections, corroding public faith in our most precious birthright. Even now, in advance of the 2024 election, they are stoking the party faithful to not accept the result if Harris wins.

While both parties tend to see democracy as just one among the several rights enumerated in the Constitution, Republican behavior in the aftermath of the 2020 election was unparalleled in its disregard for the public will. Republicans act as though Mr. Trump's behavior after the 2020 election was of a piece with Democratic behavior after the elections of 2000, 2004, and 2016. This is untrue! Democratic behavior after those elections was more like Republican behavior after the elections of 1992 and 1996. Since Bill Clinton had not won majorities in either of those elections, there was deep Republican grumbling about his legitimacy. In the same way, Democrats grumbled in the aftermath of 2000, 2004, and 2016.

In 2000, upset at how Florida went down, the Congressional Black Caucus *did* vote against certifying Bush as President, receiving glares from their fellow Democrats, including the former candidate Al Gore, who officiated over the proceedings as Vice President. Some Democrats, including Robert F. Kennedy Jr., complained about the Ohio vote in 2004. And in 2016, Hillary Clinton supported a legal effort by Jill Stein to recount the votes in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. In each of these cases, though, the Democratic candidate conceded the election, attended the subsequent Inauguration, and the Democratic administration fully cooperated during the transition.

Trump did none of the above. He led an effort to galvanize Republican officials to overturn the election on a state-by-state basis. It is worth noting that he did not reach out to Democratic Governors, Democratic Secretary of States, and Democratic Attorney Generals to lodge his complaints. Rather, Trump sought to overpower Democrats with Republican officialdom, including the Courts. He agitated his followers to assault Congress while it was tabulating votes from the Electoral College. He did not cooperate with the incoming Biden administration. He did not attend the Biden inauguration and was the first President since Andrew Johnson to slink out of town as his successor was being inaugurated. This behavior is not a difference in degree from 2000, 2004, and 2016, it is a difference in *type*.

Both sides certainly have ideas about improving election integrity and *that* is a discussion worth having. Republicans want to restrict voting to Election Day, institute a discipline of voter identification, and use paper ballots. Democrats are fine with paper ballots but want to extend the voting period and maintain the current system of signature verification. The entire process is complicated by the fact that, in our country, elections are run at the state and county level. Still, a compromise is out there, and it might begin with the plain truth that administrative procedures around elections in our country, after three hundred years of trial-and-error, are fairly airtight. Despite best efforts from sore losers, and notwithstanding the fevered swamp of internet conspiracy theories, no one has brought forward legally verifiable examples of systematic voter fraud. At the end of it, the "rigged election" argument usually comes down to dissatisfaction about how "the media" covered the campaign. Certainly, it is no fun losing elections, but unlike Abraham Lincoln, Americans lately have taken to sobbing up a storm.

In a democratic republic, there will be some stupid policies, but to the extent democracy *is* the principle, we are free to use the experience of stupid policies to become less stupid. Take the abortion issue: there is no federal law which says abortion must be legal across the country, and in the absence of such a law, state and local governments will decide the matter. Does that mean women are relinquishing control of their bodies to “government”? Yes, that is exactly what it means. Government is a coercive authority. It has that power, just as it has the power to conscript young men into military service. As much as we may hate it, coercion is a fact of life, whether it comes from duly constituted government or the local street gang. There is no getting around the reality that *some* authority will coerce us. The problem arises when power is not accountable to those upon whom it is being applied. When power *is* accountable, we all learn and grow.

Is Mr. Trump a “fascist?” No more than Ms. Harris is a “communist.” We can assume the good intentions of our fellow citizens, mainly because intentions do not matter much in the larger scheme of things. We are never able to ascertain anyone’s *true* intentions, as that stuff is hidden from sight, particularly by skilled politicians. We *can* say that the vast majority of Americans, including President Trump and Vice President Harris, are democratic capitalists. There are different versions of democracy and there are different versions of capitalism. Further, the principles of democracy sometimes collide with the principles of capitalism. These differing versions and principles can lead to bitter clashes. But the fact Trump is not particularly interested in the Constitution does not make him less of a (small “d”) democrat. It only means that he thinks our horse-and-buggy constitutional system should not interfere with the business of keeping our country strong and prosperous. In that, he is not wrong.

As Kamala Harris has been introduced to the American people, one of her repeated applause lines is that “someone who suggests we should terminate the Constitution of the United States of America should never again stand behind the seal of the President of the United States.” Is this true? The political establishment in our country certainly seems to think so. In their minds, civic authority springs, not from democratic representation, but from the rule of law—and ultimately, the Constitution. It is one of those universally accepted axioms that turns out to be a half-truth. Just as a pot is not greater than its potter, the rule of law cannot be greater than democracy. In this country, democracy is what creates the laws in the first place. And when the “rule of law,” and its underlying Constitution, tries to shift the meaning of democracy from majority rule to minority rights, then the door has been opened to tyranny—which is the *opposite* of democracy.

For this reason, Donald Trump has been a godsend. Democracy is not merely a political system, it is a cultural system as well. The United States is a secular republic, arguably the greatest product of the British Enlightenment, but being in the majority has its privileges. Our language is English. Our faith is Christian. Our ethnic heritage is Anglo-American. These things are valuable to most Americans, even those who speak another language at home, or practice another faith, or have a different ethnic background. This is what their families chose when they moved here. They liked what we were cooking. For our part, we respect that Americans come from all walks of life. We understand that our country was borne, among other things, from racism, but Americans did not invent bigotry. Any person who thinks that our history is uniquely cruel or unjust is a fool. We did, however, play an outsized role in shaping a world where ordinary people can manage their own lives. This is why, despite our Anglo-Christian ways (or perhaps *because* of it), people from around the world have flocked to our shores.

Why would I consider Trump? There are three main reasons. First, I think it is vitally important to reconsolidate our culture. The United States is a melting pot, not a salad bowl. When a family makes the decision to leave the old country, they must recognize that within a generation or two, their children will be very different. For sure, we will eat pizza and practice feng shui and celebrate Cinco de Mayo, but we will do it in an American way. Towards that end, we need to teach patriotism, as children must understand that citizenship in the United States involves an important set of responsibilities. Given our generational obsession with minority opinion, we have been remiss on imparting the importance of our duty towards majority opinion. This includes the Trumpian refusal to accept election results. Our country protects us from the nasty savagery of a hard world, and all it requires, after the votes are cast, is that we swing with the program.

The second reason I considered Trump is that we need energetic, morally self-confident, federal government. While I do not think Trump, or the Republicans, have any unique capacity to generate a broad dispersion of prosperity and happiness. I do think it is important for us to give government its teeth. We will not get that government with Kamala Harris. While there is the argument that Kamala, however imperfect, buys some time and keeps a criminal out of the Oval Office, this election, like all elections, is less about the candidates themselves than what they represent. Trump is more John the Baptist, but what he represents is like Jesus, and it is important for small “d” democrats to recognize the opportunity he presents to salvage democratic government from the “constitutional” morass of division, inaction, and chronic unfairness. Achieving escape velocity from toothless government is the important thing. Long after Mr. Trump is gone, Americans would be glad that they took power out of the hands of lawyers and put it back in the hands of citizens.

The third reason involves Mr. Trump’s singular contribution to life in our country. I am deeply grateful to him for shifting the economic paradigm in our country. For decades, the establishment in both parties told us we must bow before the global economy. It supposedly promoted freedom, world peace, and lower prices. “You don’t like these wages? Fuck you, we will just hire immigrant labor. Better yet, we will take the jobs to China! Fuck you. Get yourself a college degree.” Until Trump came along, both sides made this argument—from Clinton to Bush to Obama. Trump resurrected economic nationalism, which, among other things, acknowledges that government has a role to play in the economic success of our country.

There is a lot of political chatter, as we head down the homestretch of this election, about the fact Trump said that Hitler did some things right. From an economic perspective, Hitler got right what FDR got right: they made decent and remunerative jobs a national priority and were willing to use government towards that end. Economics is indifferent to civic morality, even though good economic outcomes can enhance our civic lives, and bad economic outcomes can do the reverse. An affluent, middle-class population is more likely to buy into the big picture than a poor population scruffing for its next meal.

Which leads to the issue of Trump’s immorality and even criminality. The hard truth of politics, democratic and otherwise, is that we cannot truly know the character of our leaders. We may, or may not, have accurate impressions, but we do not know for sure. Machiavelli pointed out more than 500 years ago that the leader who excels at *faking* good character holds a decisive advantage over the leader who has good character. We are chumps when we believe leader X is more “authentic” than leader Y. Character and authenticity are useless ways to determine which

candidate to support in a general election. Hopefully that stuff gets caught further upstream, when candidates are being nominated, but in the *general* election, our job is to figure out the way forward. This involves much more than the character or authenticity of one man (or woman); it involves the fate of our country.

That is why the Supreme Court's decision about Presidential immunity was so contemptible: criminality is the only verifiable moral standard we have in the political arena. It is certainly important to be principled citizens, but we become easily manipulated when we try to impute that stuff upon our leaders. In their disdain for democracy, the Supreme Court removed the only check we have on Presidential bad behavior. No fellow citizen, even the President, is above the law. The privileged position of being above the law belongs only to democracy itself. The Court's decision speaks to how far afoot the judicial branch has gone in this country, as they indiscriminately undermine democratic safeguards while abrogating their baseline responsibility to keep criminality in check.

Obviously, Trump claims that the charges against him are "lawfare," the product of a Democratic government seeking to punish its rival. From where I sit, we would all be fortunate to receive treatment like Trump, getting kid's glove treatment from prosecutors and from judges. It speaks to our two-tiered criminal justice system, where the defendant who can afford a platoon of lawyers gets to be lawless while everyone else, when they are caught, are thrown into prison to be terrorized and assaulted. Bottom line is that, in a republic, Presidents are citizens, and citizens are subject to the law. Trump has a lifelong pattern of cutting corners. It is not cute. It is not funny. It is parasitical. Lawbreakers get an undue advantage over those of us who follow the rules. Effectively, we "subsidize" them. When we glorify cheating ("if you are not cheating, you are not trying"), we reinforce distorted outcomes and moral failure.

But the main reason I cannot support Trump is his unwillingness to abide by democracy. Trump could have been our country's greatest democratic champion since Andrew Jackson. Instead, not a single vote has been counted and he is already whining about how unfair it is. Republicans, who always have a problem with hubris (just as Democrats always have a problem with bedwetting), are primed to think they were robbed if they lose.

In 2020, Trump had every advantage and still could not win. He was President during a national emergency. He had the power of incumbency. And he was (irresponsibly) out on the campaign trail as Biden and Harris ran a porch campaign. There is a reason why politicians campaign: because it works. But rather than exploit those advantages, Trump chose to lay a foundation of distrust so that he could claim the election was "rigged" if it did not go his way. He did the same thing in 2016. There was no serious foundation of distrust towards American elections until Trump came along.

Unfortunately, and for different reasons, neither Trump nor Harris are friends of majority rule. I do think Kamala Harris would do a better job maintaining our standard of living and preserving our reputation around the world. Although an economic nationalist, Trump has bad macroeconomic ideas. He also seems to gravitate towards the more disreputable (anti-democratic) world leaders. To her credit, Harris says that she is open to good ideas, no matter where they come from. The problem is that she has not been forthright about the three biggest problems, as defined by the Republicans: inflation, immigration, and "woke" transgenderism. Trump has met the challenges posed by Democrats, i.e., democracy and abortion. He will talk about anything. He goes on and

on. You can say that is bad, or that what he says is bad, or that *he* is bad, but Trump is also transparent—at least about politics. Democracy requires politically forthright leaders; Harris is less than politically forthright. Unlike Trump, she does not seem to trust the intelligence of Americans.

If Trump is elected, there will be free and fair elections in 2026 and 2028. Democrats proclaiming otherwise are performing a disservice. It is false to argue that Republicans are authoritarian. No real American is opposed to democracy. It is just that the stakes are so high—privilege vs. poverty, power vs. powerlessness, peace vs. war, even death vs. life—that many think winning is the most important thing; and as the proverb goes, where winning is the religion, cheating is the sacrament. The most important thing, regardless of one's personal leanings towards the Left or towards the Right, is that the government reflects the will of the people. Else there is tyranny—and tyranny, more than anything else, is unamerican.

For myself, I want cultural consolidation, economic nationalism, and a vigorous, morally self-confident government. For a moment, I thought Trump might serve as the vehicle for these things. I was never under any illusion that Trump could take us in the right direction, but I briefly harbored the hope that he could provide escape velocity from a bad civic template. In the end, though, I decided to vote for Harris because Trump is too old, just as Biden was too old. I may not be able to know a man's character or level of authenticity, but I can see with my own eyes that, after his long and somewhat addled life, Trump is in no position to lead our country.

I am one of those who think that J.D. Vance might be a good President. On the cultural side, he is much closer to right than the Democrats. The problem with Vance is that he seems captive of the Project 2025 stuff, which would only tighten the oligarchic grip on our country. I think that the idea that we can—and should—recover 19th century America is arrogant. The 1800s were peppered with destabilizing economic convulsions which obliterated families and communities. Progressive reforms, such as civil service, income tax, and the administrative state, grew out of those failures. American conservatism too often ignores the lived experience of Americans at the time. We can have patriotic history without looking at the 19th century through Disneyesque lenses.

In any case, I am voting for Harris because I would rather sputter along for another four years than risk disruption which puts our country further behind the eight ball. But I will be voting, in the future, for the candidate—whether he is Democratic or Republican—who puts the Constitution second to the will of the people, who cherishes the moral authority of democratically construed government, and who is not afraid to use it to improve the life of our culture and our economy. I could unambiguously support *that* candidate. The time has come to fight for our middle-class, Jeffersonian republic, and I live in the hope for a candidate who is as open and brazen as Trump, but with more fidelity to government which governs with the consent of the governed.

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