

## **II. Understanding America Today**

### A. American Politics

1. In 2016, to the surprise of most observers, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, instead of his main rival Hillary Clinton.
2. During the election, Trump, a wealthy real estate mogul, presented himself as the candidate who would “Make America Great Again.” The meaning of this slogan was: the rejection of the policies of the outgoing president Barack Obama, who had in Trump’s view harmed or undermined America in various ways.
3. The candidacy of Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, was generally viewed as representing the continuation of Obama-era politics. (Trump was the nominee chosen by the Republican party, and Clinton was chosen as the nominee for the Democratic party, to whom Obama also belongs.)
4. Many issues were involved in the election, as always, but one stands out in the big picture of American history. President Obama was the first “African-American” president in the history of the United States.
5. The importance of this fact is undeniable in and of itself, because Africans were first brought to America as slaves during colonial times, slavery remained part of American culture until the Civil War, and discrimination against people of African descent due to racism remained a disturbing feature of American culture well into modern history.
6. In addition, a recent cultural movement called “*Black Lives Matter*” champions the view that racism is still a major problem in American culture. Since this movement is almost exclusively supported by Democrats, and Republicans generally deny that its claims are valid, the replacement of president Obama by Donald Trump has strengthened the intensity of this debate.
7. Other issues, such as the so-called “right to healthcare,” championed by president Obama through the “Affordable Care Act” (ACA, or “Obamacare”) and the conduct of the United States as the “world police power”—including controversial spying on American citizens as part of the “War on Terror,” and entanglements in on-going wars in the Islamic Middle East during Obama’s presidency—were also a part of what Donald Trump rejected as a candidate, and which together are key issues in American politics today.
8. A recent issue of great significance in 2020 has been government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which originated in China. The virus is blamed for nearly a million deaths worldwide, and many countries, including America, responded to it by imposing “lockdowns,” forcing people to stay home, resulting in great economic hardships for Americans.
9. Having been president for nearly one full term at this time, despite being under constant attack by the media, most of which overtly favors the Democrats, Donald Trump is standing for re-election under the slogan “Keep America Great.”
10. His adversary this time around is Joe Biden, who formerly served as Barack Obama’s vice-president.

## B. The American Social Contract in our Times

1. Whatever Americans disagree on in terms of specific issues and in terms of what candidates they support for president, certain features of American life today are accepted by nearly everyone, and make up what can be termed the “social contract.”
2. In the simplest terms, a “social contract” is an agreement between people about how life should be lived.
3. For instance, every family has a “social contract,” which includes the responsibilities of each of the parents, and the rules that apply to each of the members of the household, including pets!
4. History At Our House classes also exhibit a social contract. Mr. Powell commits to being available for live classes on a certain schedule to present certain material, and your parents commit to a certain schedule of payments to qualify you to participate. For your part, if you want to participate in the live class, you agree to raise your hand and wait your turn to you speak, and you agree not to disrupt the class in other ways, such as by chatting and/or annotating without permission.
5. In American society as a whole, the social contract is a much more complex sum, because it involves all the different ways in which people interrelate, from the rules of the road, to “social distancing” because of Covid, from social media etiquette, to rules for tipping at a restaurant, and even to simple things like how you greet people at a grocery store or elsewhere in public.
6. In formal terms, in the context of a society as a whole, the social contract is: *the prevailing moral, political, economic, and technological forms of association that underline and determine the way in governance takes place.*
7. For instance, in the American social contract to this day, the Constitution has been almost universally accepted as the strict set of rules that everyone (including the president) must conform to, and which dictates, among other things, that presidential elections must be held every four years, and that the outcome will be determined according to a system known as the “electoral college.”
8. Another feature of the social contract today, and during most periods in American history, is the commitment to a two-party system, whereby (in the current case) Americans have agreed to entrust the government to either Democrats or Republicans, believing that these two choices adequately represent the spectrum of acceptable political choices. (Interestingly, in connection with this, in the 2016 election 100 million Americans—by far the largest block—did not even vote, indicating that the largest potential voting block in America is ambivalent about the alternative presented.)

## C. The First Anchor Fact of the Story

1. When history is studied in order to reveal and explain the world we live in, it is important to find the right way to capture the present.
2. To find the right way to describe the present is the most crucial thing, because if we don’t start in the right place, we won’t be looking for the right thing to explain.

3. For instance, if we begin simply with the presidency of Donald Trump, we will not be adequately describing the present.
4. The meaning of the Trump presidency lies in the fact that it follows the Obama presidency, and is directly linked to it.
5. In that sense, the combination of the presidencies of Obama and Trump are the first “anchor fact” of the story.
6. An “anchor fact” in the study of history is an event from the past to which one must refer in order to explain some aspect of the world we live in. We might not think of the Obama presidency and the election of the Donald Trump as being “in the past,” but they are: the most recent past that explains the particular quality of the present we now live in.
7. American history at this time is the story of a country that has culminated in the two-terms presidency of Barack Obama (2009-17) *which was then followed* by the presidency of Donald Trump. These things are both true and important.
8. Represented on a simple timeline, the story we must learn is

