

III. The History of the American Social Contract

A. American Politics Today: The “Wobble” (2009-)

1. In 2009, Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. This was an important change in history all by itself, but it led to a series of upheavals in American politics that have an even greater significance.
2. President Obama was the first “African-American” president in the history of the United States. The importance of this fact is undeniable, 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. The idea that Americans should elect an African-American president was a way to show that these negative aspects of American history are no longer true. Obama’s electoral slogan, “Change We Can Believe In,” effectively capture this hopeful idea.
3. In addition, however, 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 (one of the two major political parties, to which President Obama belonged) while Republicans (the other major party) generally deny that its claims are valid, the replacement of president Obama by Republican Donald Trump in 2017 is a big part of the instability in American politics today, which shows just how much Americans are split on such questions.
4. During his election campaign, 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.
5. 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 continue to be key issues in American politics today.
6. Also relevant, and highly controversial, was the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which originated in China. The virus is blamed for millions of 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. Since lockdowns began under Donald Trump, but were also advocated by Democrats, it is not easy to separate the two sides on the issue. Republicans have generally been against forcing people to stay in their homes and against placing intense pressure for people to accept a new kind of vaccines, known as an mRNA vaccines, as a dubious way to stop the virus. Such controversies remained unresolved, and they also show how Americans are split over important questions.

7. Having been president for one full term despite being under constant attack by the media, most of which overtly favors the Democrats, and despite being twice impeached, Donald Trump stood for re-election under the slogan “Keep America Great.”
8. He obtained a remarkable *eleven million more* votes in his second bid for the presidency than the first time around, but he was still defeated by Democrat Joe Biden, who formerly served as Barack Obama’s vice-president.
9. The fact that Americans went from Obama to Trump, and then to Biden, represents a wild swing from one side to another (usually referred to as “left” and “right” in politics). Although changing their minds is something Americans have a right to do, and it is certainly something they have done many times in history, these swings are not normal. They are extreme, because of the major differences between the candidates. They represent a “wobble” in the social contract.

B. The American Social Contract in our Times

1. Whatever Americans have disagreed on in terms of specific issues and in terms of what candidates they support for president, certain features of American life have been accepted by nearly everyone until the “wobble,” and these agreements 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 set of 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 was ambivalent about the alternative presented. In addition, an important independent candidate, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is presenting himself as a candidate in 2024. Having a major candidate that is not part of either party is another sign of a “wobble,” i.e. an instability of the social contract.

C. The Wobble as 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 current presidency of Joe Biden by itself, we will not be adequately describing the present.
4. The meaning of the Biden presidency lies in the fact that it follows the Trump presidency, which follows the Obama presidency. They are all closely linked together.
5. In that sense, the combination of the presidencies of Obama, Trump, and Biden are the first “anchor fact” of the story. (An “anchor fact” in the study of history is an event we must study in order to connect the past and the present—to “anchor” them together. This first anchor fact describes the present, and our story will explain it.)
6. American history at this time is the story of a country that has culminated in the presidency of Barack Obama (2009-17) *which was then followed* by the presidency of Donald Trump, and then Joe Biden. These things are all true and important.
7. Represented on a simple timeline, the story we must learn is:

