

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. He was the first “African-American” president in the history of the United States.
2. This was important, because Africans were first brought to America as slaves during colonial times, and they were treated badly for most of American history.
3. 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.
4. To be elected, Obama chose the slogan was “Change We Can Believe In.”
5. After Barack Obama was president, however, Donald Trump, a wealthy businessman, presented himself as the candidate who would “Make America Great Again.” The meaning of this slogan was: the rejection of the policies of Barack Obama.
6. One disagreement between them was about the so-called “right to healthcare,” championed by president Obama through the “Affordable Care Act” (ACA, or “Obamacare”), which was never thought of as a “right” in American history until recent times.
7. Donald Trump was successful and served as president for four years, but when he tried to be re-elected with the slogan “Keep America Great,” he was defeated by Joe Biden, who previously had been Barack Obama’s vice-president.
8. The fact that Americans went from Obama to Trump, and then to Biden, represents a wild swing from one side to another, which we will call a “wobble” in the social contract.

B. What is a Social Contract?

1. In the simplest terms, a “social contract” is an agreement between people about how life should be lived.
2. 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!
3. History At Our House classes also has 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.
4. 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 act, including the rules for driving, the rules for using social media, 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.

5. As part of the social contract, Americans have agreed to choose between Democrats and Republicans. They are the names of the main political parties, which are organizations of people who believe in many of the same things.
6. Barack Obama and Joe Biden are Democrats. Donald Trump is a Republican.
7. One thing that shows that the social contract is wobbly is that an important independent candidate, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is presenting himself for president in 2024. Having a major candidate that is not part of either party is another sign that the social contract is unstable.

C. Explaining the Wobble

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. The reason why Joe Biden is important is that he follows Donald Trump, who is important, because he followed Barack Obama. All three of these presidents are part of the present.
3. To explain how America became this way, the story we must learn is shown as a question about the past:

