

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, slavery remained part of American culture until the Civil War, and discrimination against people of African descent due to racism remained a part of American culture well into modern 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. Obama’s electoral slogan was “Change We Can Believe In.”
4. 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 the outgoing president Barack Obama, who had in Trump’s view harmed or undermined America in various ways.
5. 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.
6. Donald Trump stood for re-election under the slogan “Keep America Great.”
7. 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 Joe Biden, who formerly served as 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 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.

5. 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 follow, and which requires that presidential elections must be held every four years, using a system called the “electoral college.” (We will learn more about this as we go.)
6. Another feature of the social contract today, and during most periods in American history, is the commitment to a two-party system, which means that Americans vote for either Democrats or Republicans. Barack Obama and Joe Biden are Democrats. Donald Trump is a Republican. One thing that shows that the social contract is wobbly is that 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 that the social contract is unstable.

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. If we begin simply with the current presidency of Joe Biden by itself, we will not be adequately describing the present.
3. The reason why Joe Biden is important is that he follows Donald Trump, who is important, because he followed Barack Obama. They are all closely linked together.
4. 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.)
5. Represented on a simple timeline, the story we must learn is:

