

Despite Appearances, These Are Great Times for Human Liberty

Are you despairing of the presidential electoral trajectory? You are not alone. You are in the majority, one might even say the silent majority.

A majority of voters in both major American political parties tell pollsters that they neither like nor trust the front runners for the nomination. This is true even in states where Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump had their strongest primary victories.

Political historians observe that this is unprecedented in modern history.

“The highest unfavorability rating for any nominee or front-runner was 57 percent, for the elder George Bush, in October 1992,” points out *The New York Times*. But in that same year, Bush’s opponent Clinton was widely liked and trusted. That later changed, of course; in due time, Clinton became unpopular. But then Barack Obama arrived to save the day.

So it has always been. People have channelled their disgust with the system to back a new champion of change, someone believe can believe in or, at least, not dread. Support candidate X as a lesser evil than Y. The electorate rolls from one season to the next, seesawing between this party and that, largely unaware that the system is playing them all for fools.

Now for the first time, large majorities report being fed up and disgusted with both choices. We already know, for example, that old-line Republicans deeply distrust and even loathe Trump. More importantly, two-thirds of Americans have no regard for him whatsoever. As regards the Democrats, HuffPo

[reports](#) that, “in 10 out of 10 national polls regarding favorability, Hillary Clinton has negative favorability ratings nationally in all 10.” And the Wall Street Journal [reports](#) that one third of Sanders’ supporters are on record as refusing to vote for Hillary.

As Frederick Douglass said: “the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.” Or FEE’s Robert Murphy summarizes: “This election has done what a hundred articles could not. People no longer hate me for saying I am not going vote for anybody.”

With disgust so widespread, and both parties deeply fractional, conditions are ripe for the two nominees to engage in the most bitter struggle ever for the remaining believers. The unfolding acrimony will undoubtedly leave a bad taste in people’s mouths. The reputation of government and its processes will [continue to slide](#).

Already, government is [ranked epically low](#) for its corporate reputation. Only the tobacco industry scores lower.



Widespread Loathing

This is not some anomaly. It is part of a long trajectory.

In international affairs, trust in government has never been lower. It is remarkable to think that even during the Vietnam era of mass protests and draft riots, overall trust in the government to manage foreign affairs was 74%. It’s been one long slide since then. Today, trust is a dismal 45%. And matters are even worse on domestic matters. At the start of Nixon’s second term in 1972, 70% of those surveyed trusted their government (if you can believe it). Today, it is 38%. No poll in the Nixon era, even after Watergate, has ever seen the domestic trust level dip into the 30s.



Long gone are the days when government attracted the “best and the brightest” and when the presidency was the most exalted institution in American culture. What began with George Washington probably ended with Watergate. But the descent from tragedy to comedy has accelerated over the decades. The stature of the presidency – and the public sector generally – is a mere shadow of what it once was.

Civic do-gooders lament this, knowing full well that a large and invasive state depends on social consent for its stability and longevity. But it is actually a positive development for the cause of human rights. In a time of overweening state power, skepticism of government is a prerequisite for a future of freedom. It is about trusting people, not governments. Power must recede for liberty to flourish. Political managers rely on public trust for their authority. The weaker is that trust, the more fragile is their rule.

Here is something even more significant: a clear line has been drawn between liberty and power, creating a world in which the entire political system lives under a cloud.

Will Politics Save Us?

It has not always been this way. For most of modern history, the cause of liberty has been identified with politicians who claim to represent it. Republicans have professed to want smaller government in certain areas, while Democrats have said they wanted it out of other areas. In reality, neither party has ever done much to reduce government government. Instead, it has constantly grown no matter who is in office.

Now neither candidate even pretends to represent the cause of human rights or liberty. Instead, they unabashedly represent two flavors of authoritarianism, both domestic and

international. Both Trump and Clinton agree on all public-policy essentials: the exaltation of police and the military, the drug war, protectionism, immigration, perpetual welfarism, domestic surveillance, war as a panacea for the world's afflictions and so on.

There will always be people who will be taken in by promised blessings flowing from a strong and well-intentioned leader. You need only look at a Trump or Clinton rally to see that this is true. And it will only get worse; as government continues to fail, as it must, the chorus calling for some variant of socialism and/or fascism will only grow louder.

But that is just on the surface. With majorities now fed up with the whole top tier, it will no longer be possible to regard the presidency as a proxy for some mythical will of the nation. That illusion is long shattered.

It appears that the cause of liberty will have to go its own way. That means it must strengthen itself and fight for its own rights. Yes, it can be discombobulating to suddenly realize that the cause of human rights cannot be outsourced to the political class. But that is the reality and it is long past time that we deal with it. Moreover, it is not a curse; it's an opportunity.

A President Without a Mandate

Yes, candidates are using popular discontent, preying on the gullible, as a path to personal power. Whoever wins in November, the trend of government becoming ever less trusted and popular is going to accelerate. Think of it: upon taking office, he or she immediately makes history as the most unpopular president in history, not just in the US but throughout the world. A majority of the planet will be allied against the world's most powerful man or woman. That has to make an impression.

Presidents like to take office with the feeling of having a

mandate to enact their vision. But that sense will be hard to achieve when the outcome of both the primaries and the general election are flukes: a result of a unified but fanatical minority, pitted first against a divided opposition, and then against a deeply unpopular establishment opponent, at a time of economic and imperial decline.

As a result, every policy is questioned. Every failure of government is blamed on the president. Every war gone wrong, every policy screw up, every late check, every foreclosed home, every infringement on rights and liberties, falls squarely at his or her feet. Every inefficiency, bad deal, waste, abuse, fraud, and foul-up has a name written on it. At last, once the central state is under the complete control of avid authoritarians, liberty's hands will be clean.

Politics in the US is not unlike the last days of the Soviet experiment. Once confidence in the regime had been lost, there was nothing Mikhail Gorbachev could do to save it. If he tightened the grip, people became even angrier. If he loosened, they sensed the vulnerability of the system. At some point, the ruling class could no longer depend on the suspension of disbelief in the sustainability of their command-and-control systems that had stopped working long ago.

So it might in the US. What triggered the meltdown? The election, sure. But the demoralization is foreshadowed by thousands of public-policy failures, most recently Obamacare. This fiasco hit vast numbers of people at the very core of what matters most: money and health. A vast gulf separated the promise and the reality. Millions were promised new access to health care. What they got was a system that forces people to pay for health care they can't afford to use. The result was the biggest policy meltdown in decades, one that few in politics are willing to defend.

Obamacare – heralded as a mighty legislative triumph of great minds and great leaders – became the archetype of a more

generalized failure.

Can One Person Make America Great?

Let's just rule out right now the hope that Trump or Hillary can personally make America "great" or "whole." In fact, the illusion that it could happen is ridiculous. Societies become great only through the diffusion of action among millions, even billions, of individuals, one decision at a time. It is the absence of power, not its presence, that builds civilizations. It does not result from the central dictate of some great man or woman.

Plus, not even the world's most powerful and intelligent person is capable of managing such a sprawling apparatus as a central state, especially not one with millions of employees and tens of thousands of agencies and sub-agencies, plus 200 years of embedded legal and regulatory craft gumming up the works. The whole of the modern state in developed democracies is structured to make them impossible to manage. As even Khrushchev discovered when he became the Soviet ruler, the bureaucracy does not obey you; controlling it is like controlling a "tub of dough."

The Privatization of Life Itself

Compared with a half a century ago, it has become ever more obvious that government cannot fulfill its promises. Every failing sector in American life, each with rising prices and worsening service, is dominated by government intervention: health care, education, public utilities, and, of course government itself. Meanwhile, in the digital and globalized consumer marketplace, prices fall and quality improves.

The result has been [innovation on a scale](#) not experienced in more than a century. Consumers have never had more choice. Communication monopolies have completely collapsed. The young generation may claim to be interested in socialism, but what they actually practice is a form of decentralized capitalism

on a level no generation has ever experienced. Everything from our social networks to our continuing educational pursuits to our consumer possessions are customized down to the level of the individual mind.

Yes, the state is still growing and will continue to do so. But remember that this time the resistance has powerful tools at its disposal. We have social media. We have access to a gigantic digital publishing system. We have the most efficient communications system in history. Combine that with a presumption of moral outrage at the “commander-in-chief” of the country, and you have the makings of a serious opposition that cannot be ignored.

And who will be the resistance? Think of everyone who has been criticizing Trump and/or Hilary in the last six months. We are talking about the whole of the educated opinion classes: left, right, and center. At long last, a large majority of the population of the United States, ruled by a deeply unpopular and constantly doubted figurehead, might be in the position to discover that all the things we love in life come to us only when we are free.

How Liberty Dawns

Historians have shown how the modern idea of liberty dawned in the late Middle Ages and after, not because it was anyone’s intention to bring it about, and not because one institution imposed it, but because many would-be centers of power were too decentralized, diffused, and disoriented to stop it from happening.

May that same path to progress be ours in this century.

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