
Never gonna give you up: Trump and what elections are for

critisticuffs

Trump's refusal to concede the 2020 election has been a source of great upset. Concessions do not have an official status, and are not necessary for the transfer of power, yet the lack of a speech admitting defeat, congratulating the victor, celebrating democracy and imploring national unity has created a seismic shock that has rippled beyond the newsrooms of CNN and the New York Times.

The reason for this response is more than a sense of decorum and tradition. What Trump has done strikes at the heart of what an election is meant to achieve. The State – the *democratic* State – seeks more than rule over its people. It seeks to rule in the name of its people, that is, for 'the people'. This shift from people, with their individual needs and interests, to the abstraction 'the people' allows the State to rule not just through its monopoly of force, but through the will of its subjects. As 'the people' individuals and groups who may have differing and often competing goals have a shared interest in a body that can regulate and adjudicate this competition. Elections both allow these competing interests to be expressed, and also reaffirm a common interest that the State can rule in the name of. By refusing to accept the results, Trump is suggesting – and many of his 74 million voters seem to agree – that there are divisions within the US society that cannot be resolved, a national unity that cannot be attained.¹

1 Godwin's law: Elections bring opposition to the fore

Election campaigns offer the opportunity for political parties to set out arguments for or against particular positions. The language of political commentators over this period – the 'struggle for power', the 'election battlefields' – reflect that these are genuinely competing positions. Politicians sometimes refer to their opponent's supporters as 'deplorables' – or worse, in the US, 'socialists' – and their members and supporters regularly throw sincere insults at each other.

Elections mean opposition. This is no sham – there are real antagonisms being expressed through political platforms. Interests within capitalist society are often at odds with each other, both between and within classes. For example, workers want higher wages, and capitalists lower ones. Coal miners want more coal-fired power stations, people with concerns about the damage caused by climate change want fewer, farmers want tariffs on food imports, poor people want cheap food. People at risk of brutalisation by the police want cops off the streets, those who feel they have property that needs defending want more cops.

Yet, in an election, the voters are presented with political platforms, grand visions for the nation, not with proposals to address their meagre and merely individual problems. Voters are invited to not just consider their immediate interests, case by case, but to transform those into political positions, opinions about how society ought to be run. What is at stake in an election is the fate of the nation,

¹ This is not something that came into being only recently, already before Trump America was "divided". The foundation for this often decried "polarisation" can be found in its decline from a status as the absolutely dominant power in the world. However, in this text we will not focus on this foundation but the general upset around Trump's refusal to concede.

which means both that merely individual grievances need to prove their relevance to this fate and that issues promoted to that status are deliberated under this perspective. Voters are invited to consider what might be the correct position on whether the US is party to the Paris Agreement, how best to address the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role and extent of the criminal justice system. The concerns of the nation become their concerns.

While these are the questions the electorate is invited to ponder, what the people actually vote for is a candidate. They are asked which candidate they trust to execute rule in a way they find agreeable. In a society filled with antagonistic interests they are tasked with empowering rulers to set the conditions that affect all, producing gains and losses, bound by nothing but their consciences and procedural rules. The objective question asked to voters is whose whims they trust: Who has the right moral character to pursue what I believe to be in our best interest?

2 Two parties, one cup: Elections rely on and ought to affirm unity

While elections bring antagonisms to the fore, what we tend to see – in successful capitalist countries – as the election process concludes, is a resulting unity. This needs explaining.

First, underneath the conflict there is a lot of agreement among those fighting for power and their supporters. An agreement that the purpose of the election is to establish who will rule. An agreement that this rule is in the name of the people. An agreement that the people need jobs, national security, a world market, etc. Democratic elections rely on unity and they are expected to affirm it. The expected outcome of the US election was ‘our president’.

Second, the potential for this unity is contained in the antagonism. The fight for power asks voters from the get go to abstract from their own individual interests and to adopt the standpoint of the nation. As described above, they are asked how to best mediate between their own interests and that of their opponents and deliberate such conflicts from the standpoint of the nation. How much brutalisation by the police is necessary to maintain law and order, how many COVID-19 deaths are acceptable considering the economic effect of restrictions, how does global dominance and leadership as part of the Paris Accord square off with the increased costs for US manufacturing? Budgetary concerns, border controls, and military spending become something the responsible voter should think about before putting an X in a box. That voters for the losing side will concede – or, more precisely, accept a concession by the leadership of their own side – is expected by the initial question they are asked.

The point of an election is to affirm this unity that is premised in the question being asked. Unity between conflicting interests within society and unity between the governed and the government.

3 Not today, Satan: Elections and moral choices

Now, famously this is not how things are playing out this time around in the US.

The transformation of individual, conflicting interests into moral choices contains within it the potential for escalation. In an election the democratic state makes a moral demand against its subjects and invites them to abstract from their individual interests for the greater good, i.e. the might of the state (“*America is back*” (Biden), “*America First*” (Trump)). But it does this by inviting its electorate to consider the State as an expression of *their* morality. This inversion, which – in passing – is the **kernel of nationalism**, means acceptance of concession is all but guaranteed. The citizens are free to fill the place holder “common good” with their respective ideals. Some hold up not being murdered by cops, some hold up their freedom to spread a pandemic, and **centrist zealots** wish everybody would shut the fuck up, all in the name of the absolute, the common good.

That elections are based on conflicting ideas about the common good leaves open the possibility that unity is *not* established. There is no necessity for the losing party to accept the result, and to mobilise its base to do the same, just the shared understanding that the election should result in the legitimising of a government and the affirmation of the unity between the State and its people.

4 I can has second term?: Trump and the concession

The response to Trump’s refusal to concede and questioning of the process has been playing out over both the corporate and social media. Some people fear a second US civil war, with a ragtag army of MAGA hatted militia, boogaloo boys and Q Anon adherents cosplaying as a new Confederacy. More sober democrats and moderate republicans are worried about instability; a substantial proportion of the population, spurred on by a sitting president, not accepting the legitimacy of the election’s outcome. Will this lead to violence? Will it affect business? Does it threaten the international standing of the US?

The approach that Biden has taken has been to unilaterally affirm unity. Once the results of the election were clear he gave a **measured victory speech**:

“I pledge to be a president who seeks not to divide, but to unify; who doesn’t see red states and blue states, only sees the United States”.

The most recent situation that came close to this current crisis would be the 2000 election. The result came down to a dispute over the results in Florida – in effect, a few hundred votes that would decide between Al Gore and George W Bush. Despite many concerns from Democrat supporters over the state’s electoral process, and subsequent court rulings barring recounts, **Gore chose unity** over continuing the fight:

“I accept the finality of this outcome which will be ratified next Monday in the electoral college. And tonight, for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession.”

Many people in the US may have been upset at this outcome, and questioned Bush’s legitimacy, but few rejected the results in any meaningful way – for starters, the leadership of their side, i.e. the people for whom they were mobilised in a bid to obtain power, decided to demobilise them. Future historians will refer to a cloud over Bush’s first term, rather than describing a revolt against his rule.

It is unclear whether this will be the case with the 2020 election. However, for all the appalled reaction, Trump’s formal approach is from the toolbox that the US legal system offers for redress. His legal challenges may be backed with evidence that only a Q Anon believer would accept, but they are no coup.

What is causing so much ruckus is the informal refusal to concede. He is not willing to resolve his conflicts with the other side through a Gore-esque conciliatory statement. What his opponents fear is that he is riling up his base to the point that they assert their particular idea of what is just in this world against the moral demand by the democratic state to fall in line and reach across the aisle. This highlights that it is not the mechanics of the democratic procedures which maintain national unity in successful capitalist countries but rather that the continued success of these procedures in these countries relies on a broad agreement, or at least acceptance, of the basic pillars of the liberal capitalist state – by those who run it and, to a lesser degree, by those whose lives are **run by it**.