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Navigating Democracy's Fragile Boundary: Lessons from Plato on Political Leadership

Alfonso R. Vergaray

Department of Social Sciences, Texas A&M International University, Laredo, TX 78041, USA;
alfonso.vergaray@tamiu.edu

Abstract: This article presents a case that former President of the United States Donald Trump was a tyrant-like leader in the mold of the tyrant in Plato's *Republic*. While he does not perfectly embody the tyrant as presented in the *Republic*, he captures its core feature. Like the tyrant, Trump is driven by unregulated desires that reflect what Plato describes as an extreme freedom that underlies and threatens democratic regimes. Extreme freedom is manifested in Trump's disregard for social and legal norms, which mirrors the lawlessness of the tyrant. The people, in turn, interpret that posture as a mark of authenticity. Understanding Trump's appeal in the United States helps alert friends of democracy to the possible rise of tyrant-like figures. In closing, and as a way of remedying the harm done by the tyrannical soul, the article recommends that society help temper tyrant-like passions in the people through a rededication to civic equality.

Keywords: Plato; tyranny; leadership; Trump; freedom; democracy; authenticity



Citation: Vergaray, A.R. Navigating Democracy's Fragile Boundary: Lessons from Plato on Political Leadership. *Philosophies* **2024**, *9*, 49. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9020049>

Academic Editor: Paul Patton

Received: 28 February 2024

Revised: 22 March 2024

Accepted: 23 March 2024

Published: 12 April 2024



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What is it about former President Donald Trump that explains his appeal? Common opinion points to his unconventional style. Unlike his political opponents, Trump “tells it like it is” and appears willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his ends. That style led observers from both the media and academic circles to claim that Trump’s authenticity, or at least the perception of his authenticity, best explains his popularity and staying power¹. Indeed, that is a fair assessment. I add to that general sensibility the claim that Trump’s indiscriminate pushing of boundaries (i.e., his “authentic” style) mirrors a tyrant-like style that provides a useful lens to consider his ability to gain and maintain support. In particular, I look to the tyrant in Plato’s *Republic* to consider whether Trump’s soul is tyrannical in a Platonic sense. Trump does not perfectly reflect the tyrant in the *Republic*, nor do I claim that he is a tyrant in any other comprehensive sense. Plato’s claim that the tyrant, for example, places his subjects in absolute slavery and reduces them to fear, poverty, and misery (577c–578a) does not fit Trump². Still, the disordered soul of the tyrant, the core characteristic of Plato’s tyrant, does correspond with Trump’s character³. Tyranny, for Plato, is a disorder of the soul in which the passions enslave and rule the higher part of the soul. Like the tyrant, Trump’s disordered soul leads him to pay little heed to the legal and social norms that restrain most individuals⁴. Trump’s perennial entanglements with the law and his boorish style of politicking evince his unrestrained tyrant-like style, which is an expression of extreme freedom. Freedom, Plato asserts, is the guiding principle in a democracy, and when a democratic people define freedom as having no restraints, a figure such as Trump finds a captive audience. While a sizable segment of Trump’s followers value restraints in certain contexts—to the extent that their calls for “law and order”, restoring religious or cultural norms, and the like reflect their values—their leader, Trump, the disorderly, often unhinged, tyrant-like leader, is willing to challenge almost any legal or social norm to achieve his ends. Plato provides insight into why and how this sort of figure appeals to democratic citizens awestruck by what they incorrectly perceive as an authentically free leader⁵.

Understanding Trump’s appeal in the United States—the emblematic democracy in modern times—helps alert friends of democracy to the possible rise of tyrant-like

figures in the future. This article examines one aspect of Trump's appeal through an analysis of the most pronounced feature of his personality—his erratic, convention-bending style—to offer a broad account of Trump's appeal as an authentic leader. This analysis abstracts from particulars⁶ to make an observation about broader dynamics, namely, the relationship between democracy, democratic citizens, freedom, and leader preferences. More specifically, it takes seriously Plato's contention that democracy, tyranny, and the tyrant are intimately interconnected. Democracies, like all regimes, according to Plato, break down, and understanding the tyrant as a political opportunist⁷ is key to discerning its unraveling.

I first connect Trump's popularity before, during, and after his presidency (2016–2021) to the aura of authenticity he projected. I then turn to books eight and nine of Plato's *Republic* to examine the tyrant and tyranny in relation to democracy. While I stick closely to the text in my reading of the *Republic*, I also use creative license in my interpretations to bring out parallels between Plato's tyrant and Trump. A critic might look skeptically on a work that attempts to use an ancient text to shed light on contemporary matters, pointing, for instance, to the dangers of conflating ancient democracy and liberty with its modern iterations⁸. Although such dangers are certainly present, I contend that Plato's analysis of liberty and democracy can fruitfully, albeit imperfectly, be lifted beyond the confines of ancient Greece⁹. I conclude arguing that an embrace of extreme freedom, which makes the tyrant appealing to democratic citizens, can be tempered by cultivating a dedication to civic equality.

1. Trump's Popularity

Despite the former president's popularity with many Americans, by various quantifiable measures, Trump was an unpopular president. In the 2016 presidential election, Trump lost the popular vote by 2.8 million votes¹⁰. Four years later, in 2020, with a voter turnout of 67%—higher than that of any other presidential election since 1901—Trump lost by over seven million votes¹¹. Trump's job-approval ratings, which barely reached 50% in his four years in office and ended at an all-time low, also tell the story of a deeply unpopular president¹². Still, by other measures, Trump was persistently popular. His popularity among his followers remained constant and grew over time. As a nominee in the 2016 presidential primary, Trump received more votes in a contest for the Republican presidential nomination than anyone on record¹³. In 2020, he received the most votes ever by a sitting president¹⁴. Trump not only tapped into the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party but also flipped previously Democratic-leaning areas and awakened a dormant electorate to the Republican side. Trump's ability to command the American public's attention no doubt helped drive the 2020 presidential election's record-high voter turnout. That election, consequently, served more as a referendum on Trump rather than a contest against his opponent, Joe Biden, or the Democratic Party. Admiration for Trump also peaked immediately following the 2020 election: according to a Gallup poll, Americans considered Trump to be the country's most admired man¹⁵. While his support took a blow in the immediate aftermath of the storming of the US Capitol, it quickly rebounded among a sizable segment of the Republican electorate and party leadership. In short, while Trump was not a popular president in terms of the raw numbers of Americans supporting him, his ability to maintain support and to draw attention to his presidency was unmatched.

Trump's ability to attract attention with his erratic behavior brought questions about his personality to the forefront in his presidential contests. This was most evident in a common refrain heard from prospective Trump voters in the 2020 election: "I support Trump's policies", went the first part of the refrain, followed by the inevitable qualification, "but I disapprove of his wild behavior/tweeting"¹⁶. Such statements reflect ambivalence about supporting, on the one hand, an uncivil leader and, on the other hand, supporting policies and aims Trump's hesitant followers endorsed or at least found to be more palatable than those offered by his Democratic opponents. Focusing on Trump's policies, however, was nearly impossible, given his bombastic personality, which overshadowed his policy

proposals. Trump came across as obviously rude, immature, and inappropriate, someone you would not want your children emulating. From a different angle, Trump's unpleasantries appeared to be an amusing show, a gravity-defying stunt demanding attention. Both sides of the Trump coin are interrelated insofar as what disturbs can elicit intrigue. As keen observers of human behavior have long recognized, "sometimes we are perversely attracted to people whom we actually loathe"¹⁷. I suspect that aside from diehard loyalists who loved everything about Trump, including his erratic personality, others—perhaps even those who fought against him fervently—harbored simultaneous feelings of amusement and disgust toward him. So, what is it about Trump that disturbs yet entices?

Trump's personality takes freedom, arguably the most precious commodity in a democracy, and embodies it in its most vulgar manifestation. In other words, Trump projects a free life, with freedom understood in this context as doing as one likes without restraint. Trump appeared to say what he wanted and did what he pleased, signaling a free and authentic life¹⁸. Neither "political correctness" nor any form of political decorum held him back. Trump's informal antics resonated with his followers and distinguished him from his political opponents who in contrast appeared inauthentic in their stilted speech and manners¹⁹.

The association of unrestrained freedom with authenticity has a history that predates the Trump presidency. Authenticity is part of a broader Western tradition that traces its roots to Socrates and that eventually blossomed in the modern period—what some scholars have called an "age of authenticity"²⁰. It corresponds with "an ethic of autonomy" that emphasizes and values an individual's self-making capabilities²¹. In highly stratified societies, in which social and individual mobility are severely limited, individuals stepping outside their rigid roles in an expression of authenticity would be perceived as an aberration, as they would be breaking the norms at the center of collective life. Valuing other goods above freedom—such as military valor, honor, and divine right—those cultures would view authenticity as at best a subordinate good. Yet in free societies that celebrate individual autonomy (i.e., democracies), the authentic individual finds a home in which she is admired for her ability to be true to herself. Consider slogans popular in American culture, that citadel of freedom: "Follow your heart", "Do your own thing", "Be yourself", and the like. In a different cultural context, "doing your own thing" would be anything but admirable. Instead, it might appear undisciplined or disloyal to a cherished way of life²².

In the 2016 presidential election cycle, authenticity was at the forefront of public discussion, with some calling the race "the authenticity election"²³. In that election, Trump was perceived as the most authentic candidate by far, first during the Republican primary and then in the presidential race against his Democratic opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. While the search for an authentic president is nothing new²⁴, it took on added features with Trump. To what is usually associated with authenticity, namely being genuine in a relatable way, Trump added a crass, unapologetic bravado that gave voice to his followers' pent-up resentments, delivering to them incivility with a cause. His political rivals set a different tone, coming across as rehearsed and self-restrained, your quintessential politicians. The 2020 presidential election cycle saw a continuation of Trump as the standard-bearer of authenticity. Ivanka Trump highlighted her father's authenticity in that election when she juxtaposed his Democratic opponent, Joe Biden, as "a vessel for whatever the fringe of the party or the mainstream media want to be", as compared to her father, who she claimed was "arguably the most authentic president we've ever had"²⁵.

The assertion that Trump is authentic might strike some as odd²⁶. Rather than authentic, certain observers saw him as a staged act (e.g., a salesman²⁷, self-help guru²⁸, or demagogue) who lacks self-understanding. In Platonic terms, he has a disordered soul, ruled by his passions instead of reason. Indeed, as I explain below, there is little substance behind Trump's authentically free façade. That said, the perception of authenticity is what matters when describing leader-follower dynamics. A democratic audience who embraces a corrupt or, as Plato put it, "extreme" conception of freedom *perceives* a Trump-like charac-

ter as free and authentic. It is that perception of authenticity that determines the meaning of authenticity in what follows.

2. Plato's Republic

Plato's *Republic* is a dialogue on justice, education, politics, and philosophy. The unifying feature of those themes is Plato's preoccupation with the polar opposition between the tyrannical (corrupt) soul and the well-ordered soul. That tension between two extremes, the worst and the best, is arguably the overarching focus of the dialogue²⁹. At one end of that pole is Socrates' development, in conversation with his interlocutors, of the ideal city. A central feature of the ideal city is its perfectly ordered nature, reflected in the differentiated roles taken on by the city's inhabitants. The city's inhabitants also reflect that perfect order within themselves as well-balanced rational, spirited, and appetitive souls. Book eight of the *Republic* introduces four inferior regime types: timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Those regimes, lacking the perfect harmony found in the ideal city, organically and cyclically transition around the ideal city. An understanding of the animating principle/desire driving the disharmony within each city clarifies the transitions among inferior cities, with tyranny representing the worst of the cities.

The insatiable desire to become as rich as possible, for example, characterizes an oligarchy (555b9–10). That desire leads to its downfall, as the insatiable drive toward riches drowns out a concern for virtue and honor, leaving the door open to intemperance. Consequently, the wealthy—caught as they are in unrestrained money-making (555c1–5)—financially exploit the youth. The transition to democracy occurs when the poor take note of the weakened and gluttonous oligarchs in power and then decide collectively to overrun them, installing democratic rule in its place (556c7–e1).

So, what is a democracy like, and what sort of person inhabits a democracy? A democracy is “full of freedom and freedom of speech”, Socrates suggests to Adeimantus. Its emphasis on liberty leads “each person [to] arrange his own life in whatever way pleases him” (557b9). Democracies have, in other words, great flexibility and tolerance for diverse ways of living. In Socrates' terms, it “contains all kinds of constitutions” (557d2). Democracies contain timocratic, oligarchic, and other types of people who are found in other regimes. That diversity leads Socrates to describe democracy as “the most beautiful of all the constitutions”; it is like “an embroidered cloak with every kind of ornament” (557c3). That beauty is courtesy of the freedom at the center of democratic regimes. And it is the very emphasis on freedom that, in democracy's nadir, leads to an embrace of “extreme freedom” and to democracy's eventual downfall³⁰.

In the mindset of extreme freedom, citizens understand any restraint as an infringement. As a consequence, they develop “sensitive” souls, “so that if anyone tries to impose the least degree of slavery, they get irritated and cannot bear it” (563d5). Plato's encounters with democratic citizens in his time undoubtedly influenced his thoughts on how democratic citizens think of freedom. Impressively, his insights have carried over to democracies in the present day. Consider former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg's campaign to fight obesity, which included a ban on drinks that contain excessive sugar. Politicians and others decried, in a panic, the threat of “big government” and “the nanny state”, which in general expressed their dismay at a potential loss of freedom represented by the ban. Freedom crusaders united to protect the precious right to drink 7–11's Big Gulp³¹. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, protestors resisted and demonstrated against mask mandates that they claimed were an infringement on their freedom³². As an exasperated epidemiologist, Eli Perencevich, noted when discussing anti-maskers at the beginning of the pandemic in the United States, “We've decided as a society that we're going to take all the people in our healthcare system and pummel them because we have some insane idea about what freedom really is”³³. Putting aside the effectiveness of mask wearing, the framing of this new law as a blow to freedom is revealing. Introducing a new law in a society that values freedom, as illustrated in the examples above, awakens sensitive souls who see any hint of restraint as a form of slavery.

And so it goes that as democracy begins to embrace a radical conception of freedom, the people start using that conceptual frame as a reference to understand their lives. This newfound attitude threatens the legitimacy of written and unwritten laws, as democratic citizens interpret legal and social norms as threats to their freedom. All authority and hierarchy become suspect. By not prizing any particular way of life, a democracy, Socrates observes, ends up “assigning a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike” (558c4). The relationship between teacher and student, and parent and child, for example, becomes blurred. “The son”, he observes, “gets into the habit of behaving like a father, feeling neither shame nor fear in front of his parents—all in order to be *free*” (562e7). Slowly, this disregard for traditional authorities broadly permeates social relations, threatening the laws and norms that govern human society. Still, laws and social norms are not immediately thrown aside. The fear of social ostracism and/or legal punishments is enough to restrain most. The desire to break free from restraints, however, remains, albeit restricted to daydreams and fantasies. So, the democratic person goes about his or her life in tension, imagining and desiring a free life, while stopping short of living that life out of (prudent) fear.

As a desire for radical freedom takes hold among the people in a democracy, the tyrant has an entry point to appeal to their sensibilities. He embodies the unencumbered pursuit of insatiable desire, bringing the people’s fantasies of unrestricted freedom to life. In upending the social and legal laws in a democracy, the tyrant leads a democracy to its eventual downfall (562b9–c2). Still, the lawless, bestial character of the tyrant is not an *ex nihilo* occurrence peculiar to the tyrant. Socrates makes clear that that character is present in every individual, manifested in his or her dream life, even by those “who seem to be entirely moderate” (571b–72b; see also Laws 697ac). Consequently, any reflection on the tyrant should include a reflection on the tyrannical elements found in all humans.

Consider an infant. The infant demands that his or her desires be met without consideration for others. In the pursuit of fulfilling desire, the infant wakes up in the middle of the night and appears to say, “I don’t care that you are asleep, feed me!” or, at other moments, “I want to be held! No matter that you are busy. Hold me!” Any parent is well acquainted with the infant as a self-absorbed narcissist. The infant becomes “His Majesty, the Baby”, as Freud observed in his essay “On Narcissism”³⁴. During this stage, humans first experience frustrated desires, no matter how good their caretakers are. The pursuit of desires, of course, does not end in infancy. Later, as the cognitive faculties develop, the frustration accompanying unfulfilled desires can inflame the imagination. When people experience a frustrated desire for food, they might begin to imagine the food that they craved as an approximation of that thwarted desire. That is a relatively harmless instance of the interplay between frustration and desire. Desires, however, are far from libertarian; they do not end “where another man’s nose begins”. They do not stop, in other words, when they are about to interfere with the well-being of others. The person who is single-mindedly focused on acquiring wealth, for example, ignores that her pursuit harms others. When such a mindset takes over a society at large, the very stability of the social order is placed in jeopardy, as Socrates illustrates in his discussion on oligarchies. Or consider a man who jealously desires a beloved and feels an uncontrollable urge to possess her. The consequences can be dire. The endless homicides committed as “crimes of passion” are a dark reminder of desires run amok. It is essential, in short, for humans to learn how to curb their antisocial impulses and cope with the inherent frustrations of being desirous beings. Laws and punishments, whether legal, social, or religious in nature, are necessary to remind the tyrant in all of us of the repercussions that await if we give into our darker angels³⁵.

Unlike the many in a democracy, the tyrant unequivocally gives into his basest desires. He does not hold back. He says what is on his mind. He behaves erratically, not to be restrained by any law, convention, or individual. He has “in his soul the greatest and strongest tyrant of all” (575c–d). A democratic audience drunk on an extreme conception of freedom sees the tyrant as the most authentic leader, as he appears to be the truest to himself. They view the tyrant’s shamelessness and lack of moderation as assets,³⁶ easily

juxtaposed with the inauthentic style of his opponents. The tyrant is a dream come to life, as he lives out the fantasies of ordinary citizens who wish they too could live their lives without restraint³⁷. Tired of fakes, a democratic people demand what they perceive to be authentic leadership.

In this sense, Trump resembles the tyrant in the *Republic*. To those embracing a radical conception of freedom, Trump is the embodiment of an authentically free individual. He speaks and acts as he pleases, appearing fearless, quashing his political opponents and the norms they dared not transgress. Who precisely is this tyrant that Trump resembles? Etymologically, the tyrant (*tyrannos*) is a leader who lacks links to an ancestral past, unbound from the norms and laws of a shared history. While the etymology of ‘tyrant’ suggests a uniqueness not seen in history, scholars have identified numerous leaders whose tactics and style paralleled Trump’s. Still, to the public imaginary of the 2016 electorate, he appeared “new”, given that no viable presidential candidate in their memory resembled Trump’s style. They experienced him, in other words, as “coming out of nowhere”. More particularly, in the ancient and Platonic conception, the tyrant is “a monster of desire”³⁸. He is “chaos incarnate”³⁹. Trump’s chaotic style was no secret; it was legion in the Trump White House and on his Twitter feed. The quintessential instance of Trump unleashed occurred during the attack on the Capitol on 6 January 2021. An unnamed Trump official described him that day as “a total monster”⁴⁰. Not only did Trump take a largely passive attitude when calling off his supporters from a volatile situation that turned violent⁴¹, with a number of rioters calling for the death of lawmakers⁴², when he finally addressed the mob, he continued emphasizing his fantastical claim that the election was “fraudulent”, concluding his message by telling those who had forcefully attacked the Capitol that they were loved and “very special”⁴³. It was a warped display of a man out of control.

“Perhaps”, a critic might reply, “Trump may resemble the man you portray, but that hardly makes him a tyrant! Trump was not a murderous leader who ‘constantly stir[red] up war,’ as Socrates claims a tyrant would (565e2 & 566e6). Instead, he largely stood against the military wing of the Republican party. Trump was more bravado than anything. For example, he may have called the fight against COVID-19 a ‘war.’ Still, in the end, even when presented with a golden opportunity to consolidate power, he instead chose to rely on a federalist approach. No emergency powers were used. A state of exception was not enacted”⁴⁴. So much for your tyrant. And to the mob, Trump showed restraint! He could have ordered his followers to fight to the death, as would a proper tyrant (565e3). In his four years in office, his unconventional style may have displeased many, but that alone hardly makes him a tyrant”.

As I conceded at the outset of this chapter, Trump is not a perfect image of Plato’s tyrant. It is his tyrant-like disordered soul, manifested in his explosive and unpredictable nature, which corresponds with Plato’s tyrant. As a complete tyrant in Plato’s mold, however, Trump occupies a gray space, as he does in many areas. Trump bends and tests boundaries without exactly bursting past them, thereby creating enough ambiguity to allow for multiple interpretations of his actions⁴⁵. Even in speech, Trump equivocates in ways that allow listeners to hear what they please, giving his detractors and followers supporting “evidence” for their respective views⁴⁶. He frequently stated, for example, that his administration had the COVID-19 virus “under control”, and that the virus is “not under control for any place in the world”⁴⁷. Sometimes, however, Trump’s actions moved beyond murky gray skies to clearer daylight. Take Robert Paxton’s evolving views of Trump as a fascist. Paxton, an expert on fascism who has written, studied, and reflected on the meaning and history of fascism for decades, resisted labeling Trump a fascist for most of Trump’s tenure as president. There were telltale signs, he noted, but Trump was not a fascist when considering the totality of his (in)actions. “Trump’s incitement of the invasion of the Capitol”, however, changed Paxton’s views. The label of fascist “now seems”, Paxton wrote a few days after the invasion, “not just acceptable but necessary”⁴⁸. Much like the case of Trump seeming like a fascist, Trump’s tyrant-light character captures the spirit of Plato’s tyrant without precisely embodying it⁴⁹.

The spirit of the tyrant is found in his unregulated desires that correspond with the extreme freedom embraced by democratic citizens. When describing the tyrant, Socrates notes, “Passion lives like a tyrant within him in complete anarchy and lawlessness” (575a). Trump possesses his own form of lawlessness. Consider the little over four thousand lawsuits Trump amassed in four decades, most of which predate his time in office⁵⁰. The bulk of those cases represent Trump’s attempts to skirt the law, which over time have contributed to his invincible image⁵¹. As Jim Zirin, a former prosecutor for the Southern District of New York, observed, “I think [Trump] thinks of himself as the Teflon man—that no one can touch him, that he has absolutely no accountability”⁵². That attitude was in part cultivated by his early collaboration with lawyer Roy Cohn. Cohn was fond of saying cynically, “fuck the law, who’s the judge?” He also taught Trump to, “Always claim you won when you lost. If you do lose, change the rules”, according to James Zirin, former federal prosecutor.⁵³ “What attracted [Trump] to Roy Cohn”, said Sidney Zion, a reporter who worked with Cohn on his autobiography, “was here was someone who had beaten the system”⁵⁴. Trump’s ability to beat the system, to do as he pleased without consequence, is part of his appeal. Or as Zirin puts it, “There’s a certain American romance to getting away with it. We all secretly admire the guy that can”⁵⁵. In this way, Trump fed into the fantasies of those longing for the kind of freedom only a tyrant can possess.

Notice that a Trump-like leader appeals to a segment of democratic citizens who fear they are losing, or have lost, power⁵⁶. They feel, in other words, the most restrained from a lack or loss of social status, opportunity, and/or wealth⁵⁷. Those restraints, in turn, make them feel subject to powers that are beyond their control (e.g., the deep state, gentry liberalism, and so on). Embracing an unrestrained (free) leader gives them the possibility to get back at the system—giving it the proverbial middle finger—and provides them with the slightest hope that they can reshape the country to their liking⁵⁸. The tyrant-like leader represents their last hurrah, a final gamble to save a nation they feel is on the brink of collapse⁵⁹. While chaos and disorder are the hallmarks of the tyrant’s behavior, his supporters see glimmers of virtue as the tyrant courageously stands up against their enemies⁶⁰. For those who revel in the status quo, fearing neither loss of power nor status, an unrestrained leader lacks appeal. They can, after all, exploit their resources and connections within a democracy to live as they please as private citizens. Consequently, a portion of those elites will see the tyrant as a threat to their way of life, as he threatens the lifestyle they are perfectly equipped to exploit. Another portion who do not find the tyrant appealing might nonetheless create alliances with him to further their hold on power⁶¹.

The tyrant, of course, is not moved by the desires or wishes of his followers or critics⁶². He is in it for himself. Paradoxically, the tyrant who is glaringly in it for himself convinces his most fervent followers that he is in it for them. Intoxicated by what they perceive as an authentically free leader, they are blinded to the slavery they are setting themselves up for. “For extreme freedom”, Socrates notes, “probably cannot lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery, whether in a private individual or city” (564a3). Extreme slavery, in Plato’s telling, is a condition in which an individual or city is enslaved to the unnecessary appetites and passions. In that condition, the rational part of the soul is subordinate to the whims of desire. The tyrant represents the bridge from extreme freedom (in the late stages of democracy) to extreme slavery (tyranny). When the tyrant, with his wild and unpredictable style, first appears to a democratic public, the people are convinced that he is the freest individual. Trump had that act down. His chaotic style was the hallmark of his administration. His displays of outrageousness were mistaken for authenticity, as his spontaneous behavior sent a message to the demos: “Here is a leader who is subject to no one and does as he pleases”⁶³.

Consider, however, that outrageousness is often a defense against authenticity. It masks, in the artificial shell of outrageousness, vulnerability. It was perhaps to be expected that Trump struggled as consoler in chief⁶⁴. His strong suit was never being vulnerable and empathetic. Instead, Trump excels at being on a stage, putting on a show, from “The Apprentice” to the White House⁶⁵. The authentic self hides behind the show. Contrary to

outrageousness, authenticity sometimes, perhaps even most of the time, requires one to be ordinary⁶⁶. That mode of being may not garner attention, but it is closer to the authentic self than to the outrageous self. Arising from the freest regime, the outrageously self-absorbed tyrant simultaneously enslaves himself and the city. “So, those with a tyrannical nature”, Socrates observes, “live their entire lives without ever being friends with anyone. . .never getting a taste of freedom or true friendship” (576a3). The tyrant, in sum, is neither free nor authentic. His disordered soul guides his actions, leaving him, in the end, enslaved and in solitude⁶⁷. Trump is not perfectly captured in Plato’s tyrant, but he is perilously close, giving the nation a taste of a tyrant-like leader.

3. Conclusions

If the principle of tyranny is the implicit aim of freedom, how might democracies avoid that fate? Put differently, what might temper the appeal of tyrant-like leaders in free societies? Following Wilson Carey McWilliams, I suggest that in a democracy, a love of equality, rightly understood, tempers a love of freedom⁶⁸. In tempering freedom, a love of equality does not destroy freedom; it perfects it, facilitating the stability and longevity of a free society.

Equality, like freedom, is indispensable to democracies. More particularly, having an equal share in rule—political equality—is a necessary condition for democratic governance. As Aristotle argued, majority rule derives from political equality, which he described as ruling and being ruled in turn (1317b3). Equal share in ruling informs majority rule, as it implores the majority to listen respectfully to and to consider minority opinions. That respect, in turn, points to the importance of civic equality, an “equal feeling and sympathy, a conviction of equal dignity and common destiny”⁶⁹. Equality thus understood moves citizens to consider themselves in relation to others and serves as a reminder that each individual is part of a larger whole.

Freedom, quite differently, points inward to the individual, and, in its many iterations, it is “engrossed with limits and power”⁷⁰. To achieve freedom, individuals must fight against some power, or someone, that stands in the way of their freedom. Freedom seeks to overcome all limits, including limits derived from public and private relations. A society in love with freedom, and that neglects political and civic equality⁷¹, leaves itself exposed to a narrowly self-interested populace that loses sight of equal dignity and common destiny. Put differently, without a society’s embrace of political and civic equality, the undemocratic idea of freedom as “living as you like” without restraints (i.e., extreme freedom) takes hold⁷².

A remedy to such an outcome is a proper schooling in political and civic equality. This is especially relevant given the fragility of relying solely on a representative form of governance and the separation of powers that were designed to restrain the mob in modern constitutional democracies⁷³. Such an education would remind citizens, for example, that in democracies, unity does not mean unity of opinion. Understanding that rule is shared, democratic citizens accept different political outcomes. The vast majority of the political policies advocated by Trump and his supporters, for instance, are legitimate alternatives in a democracy⁷⁴. It is a mistake to think otherwise. Opponents of those views might argue that some of Trump’s policies are unconstitutional, or they might object that they are un-American. Perhaps. While those concerns may be valid, one should not lose sight that Republicans (Trumpians) say the same about certain policies advocated by Democrats. Instead of a zero-sum outlook regarding partisan political alternatives, the overarching sentiment in a democracy should be of civic equality. An uncivil outlook would insist that only one political outcome is legitimate, and it would fight for its victory no matter the cost⁷⁵. Trump, of course, displayed marks of incivility throughout his presidency, culminating in his rejection of the 2020 presidential election results, striking at the heart of the democratic process.

An example of civic mindfulness during an election defeat is found in former Vice President Al Gore’s concession speech in the 2000 presidential election. In that election, Florida’s electoral ballots were contested, leading to weeks of battle, first in the Florida

Supreme Court, and then culminating in the US Supreme Court. Gore conceded after the Supreme Court's decision granting the election to George Bush. In his concession speech, he stated, "Let there be no doubt, while I strongly disagree with the court's decision, I accept it. I accept the finality of this outcome". Gore went on to explain that the outcome of the election had "ended, resolved, as it must be resolved, through the honored institutions of our democracy". Having "strongly disagreed" with the court's outcome, Gore could have claimed that partisanship was at work in the Supreme Court's decision and that that decision, unless corrected, would lead to the illegitimate presidency of his opponent. Instead, Gore stressed that "partisan feeling must yield to patriotism", which in Gore's case called for a gracious concession⁷⁶. Gore paid heed, in other words, to civic and political equality, placing the common good above narrow self-interest.

The act of putting aside partisanship for the sake of the common good is not limited to one political party. It is hard to find a greater supporter of Trump than his former Vice President Mike Pence. Yet, it was Pence who steadfastly refused to follow Trump's request—amid death threats and enormous pressure—to bypass his duty to certify the 2020 election results. Even the riotous events of January 6th did not shake Pence's resolve. Following the attack on the Capitol, Pence said that he will "always be proud that we did our part, on that tragic day, to reconvene the Congress and fulfill our duty under the Constitution and the laws of the United States"⁷⁷. On that day, Pence's loyalty to the Constitution and laws of the United States trumped his loyalty to the President.

Pence and Gore's examples, while important lessons for political leaders⁷⁸, do not speak directly to the fragmented partisan rancor that infects American politics. Partisanship and a fragmented public are, to be sure, nothing new in American political history. Still, today's fragmented and deeply partisan public have their twenty-first-century peculiarities. Most poignantly, information technologies have altered the public square. With every year that passes, more of the public integrate their online habits and communities with their offline lives, blurring the boundary between the online and offline⁷⁹. Once-obscure forms of communication tucked away at the edges of the Internet have gravitated into everyday forms of political communication⁸⁰. Meanwhile, the algorithms that drive social media usage confirm users' individual biases, resulting in "echo chambers" that further divide the public⁸¹. A good share of those echo chambers, in turn, spread virulent conspiracy theories at an exponential rate, amplifying fringe ideas to everyday realities.

In these conditions, we need fresh thinking about old political puzzles. How do you foster in the public a conviction of equal dignity and the common good? How do you create a sense of public spiritedness that combats narrow self-interest? What are the national narratives needed to facilitate holding together America's increasingly unwieldy union?⁸². It is the task of the current generation to consider these perennial political puzzles in light of new circumstances. All of these challenges, in one way or another, require restoring civic equality, which in turn demands a reckoning with the oligarchic impulses in American politics that place profit and wealth above democratic values. As was highlighted in this article, a democracy's failure to cultivate political and civic equality leaves an opening for the tyrant to exploit the public's embrace of extreme freedom. The tyrant loses his luster, however, when faced with a civically minded public who see their fellow citizens as friends, or at least as an approximation of friends, ruling in turn⁸³. Liberty is not endangered by a civically minded public. It is enhanced: "Liberty, in an ancient paradox, to be perfected, must be *ruled* by the common good and the good life"⁸⁴.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: This study did not involve the creation or analysis of new data. Therefore, data sharing is not relevant to this article.

Acknowledgments: Thanks are due to John Charles, Michael Harvey, Seth Jaffe, Mark Menaldo, Erin W Meyer and Cai Sevilla. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2018 annual

conference of the International Leadership Association and the 2020 Midwest Seminar in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy. This article first appeared as a chapter in Michael Harvey, ed., *Donald Trump in Historical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2022). Minor revisions and updates are found in the present version [96].

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Consider Victor Hanson's observations, the American classicist and military historian: "But most importantly, much of America was tired of phoniness. Whatever Trump was—and he was many things—he was at least transparently authentic." Victor Davis Hanson, *The Case for Trump* (New York: Basic Books, 2020) [1], Alexandra Hutzler, "Donald Trump Is 'Perhaps the Most Authentic President Ever, Despite Constantly Saying Things That Aren't True, Former White House Aide Cliff Sims Says", *Time*, 1 January 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/former-white-house-aide-calls-trump-most-authentic-president-1311447> (accessed on 3 September 2021) [2]. Adam Garfinkle writes that "Trump is in the Oval Office in large part because he seems authentic." Adam Garfinkle, "Trump the Authentic", *American Interest*, 14 January 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/01/14/trump-the-authentic> (accessed on 3 September 2021) [3]. See also Oliver Hahl, Minjae Kim, and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan, "The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy", *American Sociological Review* 83, no. 1 (2018): 1–33 [4].
- ² Henceforth, all parenthetical references are to Plato, *Republic*, ed. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004) [5].
- ³ When putting aside Trump's character to examine his actions and policies, the thesis that Trump represents a tyrant weakens, see Walter R. Newell, "Introduction: Tyranny Two Years on", in *Tyrants: Power, Injustice, and Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–30 [6].
- ⁴ I do not claim to know Trump's soul. Rather, I claim that Trump's style reflects the disordered soul of Plato's tyrant. Hence, I claim that Trump has a "tyrant-like" style. See Angel Torres and Marc Sable who claim Trump has a tyrannical soul in "Leadership, Statesmanship and Tyranny: The Character and Rhetoric of Trump", in *Trump and Political Philosophy: Leadership, Statesmanship, and Tyranny*, ed. Angel Jaramillo Torres and Marc Benjamin (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–14. For a full-length study of the nature of Plato's tyrant, see Cinzia Arruzza, *A Wolf in the City: Tyranny and the Tyrant in Plato's Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) [7,8].
- ⁵ Political theorists Lindsay Mahon Rathnam and Clifford Owrin echo these themes in their 2016 opinion piece, "Rob Ford and Donald Trump: Plato Would Get It." www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/rob-ford-and-donald-trump-plato-would-get-it/article29425239/ (accessed on 14 April 2021) [9].
- ⁶ For example, consider the outrage industry in "conservative" media that gave fuel to Trump's rise. See Jerry M. Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) [10].
- ⁷ See Arruzza, *Wolf*, 63 [8].
- ⁸ For examples of contemporary authors wrestling with these themes, see Josiah Ober and Charles W. Hedrick, *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) [11]; and Valentina Arena, *Liberty: Ancient Ideas and Modern Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2021) [12].
- ⁹ In this essay, I use "freedom" and "liberty" interchangeably. For an account of the differences and overlapping similarities between liberty and freedom, see David Hackett Fischer, introduction to *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1–16 [13].
- ¹⁰ Federal Election Commission, *Federal Elections 2016: Election Results for the US President, the US Senate and the US House of Representatives*, December 2017, <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/federalections2016.pdf> (accessed on 12 December 2021) [14].
- ¹¹ Drew Desilver, "Biden's Victory Another Example of How Electoral College Wins Are Bigger Than Popular Vote Ones", Pew Research Center (website), 11 December 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/11/bidens-victory-another-example-of-how-electoral-college-wins-are-bigger-than-popular-vote-ones> (accessed on 20 December 2021) [15]; Jacob Fabina, "Record High Turnout in 2020 General Election: Despite Pandemic Challenges, 2020 Election Had Largest Increase in Voting between Presidential Elections on Record", United States Census Bureau (website), 29 April 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/record-high-turnout-in-2020-general-election.html> (accessed on 2 January 2022) [16].
- ¹² "Presidential Job Approval Center", Gallup (website), <https://news.gallup.com/interactives/185273/presidential-job-approval-center.aspx> (accessed on 12 October 2021) [17].
- ¹³ Philip Bump, "Trump Got the Most GOP Votes Ever—Both for and against Him—and Other Fun Facts", *Washington Post*, 8 June 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/06/08/donald-trump-got-the-most-votes-in-gop-primary-history-a-historic-number-of-people-voted-against-him-too> (accessed on 20 December 2021) [18].
- ¹⁴ Natalie Colarossi, "Donald Trump's 73.6 Million Popular Votes Is over 7 Million More Than Any Sitting President in History", *Newsweek*, 19 November 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trumps-736-million-popular-votes-over-7-million-more-any-sitting-president-history-1548742> (accessed on 10 December 2021) [19].

- 15 Trump achieved that honor for the first time in his presidency. Zack Budryk writes that “the sitting U. S. president has been named [Gallup’s] most-admired man in 60 out of 74 years, including all eight years of Obama’s presidency and every year of George W. Bush’s presidency except for 2008. Trump had finished second to Obama in 2017 and 2018.” Prior to his presidency, Trump was in the top ten men from 1988 to 1990 and 2011. Zack Budryk, “Trump Ends Obama’s 12-Year Run as Most Admired Man: Gallup”, *The Hill*, 29 December 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/531906-trump-ends-obamas-12-year-run-as-most-admired-man-gallup> (accessed on 12 October 2021) [20].
- 16 For examples, see Jill Colvin and Aamer Madhani, 18 October 2020, “Policy vs. Personality: Undecideds Torn as Election Nears”, AP News, <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-virus-outbreak-joe-biden-donald-trump-elections-894f413fca1f4e15b0754dcfa17fdd77> (accessed on 23 October 2021) [21].
- 17 Rachel Herz, *That’s Disgusting: Unraveling the Mysteries of Repulsion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 294 [22].
- 18 The reality, of course, might be quite different. Fear of humiliation, for example, seemed to have a role in guiding/restraining Trump’s decision-making. Consider his niece Mary Trump’s characterization of Donald Trump as a “terrified little boy.” Jane Mayer, “Why Trump Can’t Afford to Lose”, *New Yorker*, 1 November 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/09/why-trump-cant-afford-to-lose> (accessed on 20 November 2021) [23].
- 19 For an explanation of why a lack of forms resonates with democratic citizens, see Harvey Mansfield, “The Forms and Formalities of Liberty”, *Public Interest* 70 (1983): 121–31 [24].
- 20 See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) [25].
- 21 Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) [26]. See also Brent Edwin Cushner and Mark A. Menaldo, *Leadership and the Unmasking of Authenticity: The Philosophy of Self-Knowledge and Deception* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2018) [27].
- 22 “Authenticity” is a contested term historically and presently. I put forward the uncontroversial claim that there is a relationship among freedom, individual autonomy, and authenticity. I do not mean to suggest that authenticity can be reduced to “doing as one pleases” or “being yourself.” That simplistic conception, however, resonates with the general public.
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- 24 See Erica J. Seifert, *The Politics of Authenticity in Presidential Campaigns, 1976–2008* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012) [31].
- 25 Noah Johnson, “Ivanka Trump Discusses President’s Accomplishments during Wilmington Visit”, *Wilmington StarNews Online*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/special/2020/09/14/ivanka-trump-discusses-presidentrsquo-s-accomplishments-during-wilmington-visit/114019260> (accessed on 2 October 2021) [32].
- 26 For one example in the popular press of this view, see Michael Gerson, “Trump’s ‘Authenticity’ Is Merely Moral Laziness and Cruelty”, *Washington Post*, 7 January 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-authenticity-is-merely-moral-laziness-and-cruelty/2019/01/07/b01f098a-12a9-11e9-b6ad-9cfd62dbb0a8_story.html (accessed on 3 September 2021) [33].
- 27 Katya Kupelian, “Barbara Corcoran on Donald Trump: ‘He Is the Best Salesman I’ve Ever Met in My Life,’” *Business Insider*, 18 December 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-best-salesman-barbara-corcoran-has-ever-met-2018-12> (accessed on 5 September 2021) [34].
- 28 Michael Kruse, “The Power of Trump’s Positive Thinking”, *Politico Magazine* (website), 13 October 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/10/13/donald-trump-positive-thinking-215704> (accessed on 5 September 2021) [35].
- 29 See Ronald Beiner, “The Soul of the Tyrant, and the Souls of You and Me: Plato’s Understanding of Tyranny”, in *Confronting Tyranny: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, ed. Toivo Koivukoski and David Edward Tabachnick (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield), 181–96. See also Arruzza, *Wolf in the City* [36].
- 30 For an overview of the concept of freedom in ancient Greece, see Kurt A. Raaflaub, *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) [37].
- 31 Hannah Miet, “40 Ounces of Freedom: Big Soda Fights Bloomberg’s Ban”, *Atlantic*, 1 July 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/07/40-ounces-freedom-big-soda-fights-bloombergs-ban/326392> (accessed on 3 October 2021) Corporate interests benefiting from the sale of sugary drinks were all too happy to go along with the narrative of “threatened freedom” to protect their profits [38].
- 32 It is worth noting that anti-maskers were a sizable group during the 1918 pandemic in the United States. See Christine Hauser, “The Mask Slackers of 1918”, *New York Times*, 3 August 2020, updated 10 December 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/us/mask-protests-1918.html> (accessed on 12 July 2021) [39].
- 33 Grant Schulte and Amy Forliti, “Nurses Wanted: Swamped Hospitals Scramble for Pandemic Help”, AP News, 2 December 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/nurses-wanted-swamped-hospitals-pandemic-0509a4a0b9e9860ad6be60379bc20a41> (accessed on 3 July 2021) [40].

- 34 Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism", in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001), 91 [41].
- 35 A human being, as Aristotle puts it in the *Politics*, is the worst of animals when "separated from law and justice" (1253a33) [42].
- 36 Seth Benardete, *Socrates' Second Sailing; On Plato's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 201 [43].
- 37 "Dreaming is a large part of democratic possibility, and when dreaming has become fully realized, it has become tyranny." Benardete, 199. Consider Michael Flynn's, the former national security adviser pardoned by Trump, dreamy statement when speaking from the stage at a Trump rally. "That's pretty cool. Imagine just being able to jump in a helicopter and just go for a joy ride around Washington." Ashraf Kahlil, "Tempers flare as Trump supporters rally in Washington" AP News, 12 December 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-donald-trump-politics-elections-8a505d0ae0915e0c9297208a76d7838a> (accessed on 20 October 2021) [44].
- 38 See Newell, "Introduction", 7. [6].
- 39 Aakash Singh Rathore, *Plato's Labyrinth: Sophistries, Lies and Conspiracies in Socratic Dialogues*. (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2017) [45], 95. See also Roger Boesche, *Theories of Tyranny: From Plato to Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 46 [46].
- 40 Philip Rucker, Josh Dawsey, Shane Harris, and Ashley Parker, "Aides Weigh Resignations, Removal Options as Trump Rages against Perceived Betrayals", *Washington Post*, 7 January 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-resignations-25th-amendment/2021/01/07/e131ce10-50a3-11eb-bda4-615aaefd0555_story.html (accessed on 15 November 2021) [47].
- 41 Ashley Parker, Josh Dawsey, and Philip Rucker, "Six Hours of Paralysis: Inside Trump's Failure to Act after a Mob Stormed the Capitol", *Washington Post*, 11 January 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-mob-failure/2021/01/11/36a46e2e-542e-11eb-a817-e5e7f8a406d6_story.html; (accessed on 12 December 2021) [48]; Richard Cowan and Sarah N. Lynch, "Police Recount Mayhem and 'Attempted Coup' in US Capitol Riot", Reuters, 27 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/police-who-defended-us-capitol-testify-riot-probes-first-hearing-2021-07-27> (accessed on 12 December 2021) [49].
- 42 "Video Shows Capitol 'Mob Calling for the Death of the Vice President,' Plaskett Says", PBS Newshour (website), 10 February 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-video-shows-capitol-mob-calling-for-the-death-of-the-vice-president-plaskett-says>; (accessed on 11 October 2021) [50] Elaine Godfrey, "It Was Supposed to Be So Much Worse", *Atlantic*, 9 January 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/01/trump-rioters-wanted-more-violence-worse/617614> (accessed on 12 October 2021) [51].
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- 49 We should refrain from focusing on the Trump phenomenon as fascist, as such a focus distracts from the historical peculiarities surrounding Trump's rise in the United States. It also feeds into the "reckless expansion" of the terms socialism and fascism, which the Left and Right overuse against their opponents. See Timothy W. Luke, "6 January 2021: Another Day That Will Live in Infamy?", *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary* 194 (Spring 2021), 153–54 [60]; Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven; Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991) 24 [61].
- 50 Nick Penzenstadler, Steve Reilly, David Wilson, Karen Yi, Pim Linders, John Kelly, and Jeff Dionise, "Donald Trump Three Decades, 4,095 Lawsuits", *USA Today*, accessed on 17 October 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/pages/interactives/trump-lawsuits> (accessed on 10 December 2021) [62].

- 51 “Many have been confounded by the legal system’s inability to constrain Trump, by his ability to escape at least thus far any legal accounting for behavior that even some leaders of his own party excoriated—and why that reckoning might never come.” Michael Kruse, “‘This to Him Is the Grand Finale’: Donald Trump’s 50-Year Mission to Discredit the Justice System”, *Politico*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/01/12/donald-trump-indictments-legal-system-00135151> (accessed on 20 January 2024) [63].
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- 53 James D. Zirin, “Trump’s Last Gasp”, *The Hill*, 13 December 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/judiciary/529965-trumps-last-gasp> (accessed on 5 November 2021) [65].
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- 55 Michael Kruse, “The Final Lesson Donald Trump Never Learned From Roy Cohn”, *Politico Magazine* (website), 19 September 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/09/19/roy-cohn-donald-trump-documentary-228144/> (accessed on 5 November 2021). [66].
- 56 I do not mean to suggest that everyone who feels powerless will find the tyrant appealing. Other segments of the powerless might feel hopeless and therefore not find the tyrant or any leader appealing; then again, others might place their hope in other political leaders and/or movements. As for Trump’s supporters, it is important to recognize their diverse socio-economic, geographic, and educational backgrounds. See Robert A. Pape and Keven Ruby, “The Capitol Rioters Aren’t Like Other Extremists”, *Atlantic*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/the-capitol-rioters-arent-like-other-extremists/617895> (accessed on 5 November 2021) [67]; “Top Contributors, Federal Election Data for Donald Trump, 2020 Cycle”, Open Secrets (website), accessed on 17 October 2021, <https://www.opensecrets.org/2020-presidential-race/donald-trump/contributors?id=N00023864> (accessed on 5 November 2021) [68]; Laura K. Field, “The Highbrow Conspiracism of the New Intellectual Right A Sampling from the Trump Years”, Niskanen Center (website), 19 April 2021, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/the-highbrow-conspiracism-of-the-new-intellectual-right-a-sampling-from-the-trump-years> (accessed on 5 November 2021) [69].
- 57 The reaction to a threat of a loss of power is arguably at the heart of conservatism. Corey Robin describes conservatism as “the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back.” Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4 [70].
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- 62 Trump may have cared about being popular and liked, but that form of caring is purely self-referential in nature; it loses sight of the other for the sake of the self.
- 63 His norm-breaking appearances in federal court have only bolstered this image, leading federal Judge Tanya Chutkan to state what should otherwise be blatantly obvious, “Trump does not have the right to say and do exactly as he pleases.” Rebecca Beitsch and Zach Schonfeld, “Judge Agrees To ‘Narrow’ Gag Order Limiting Trump Attacks On Witnesses In Jan. 6 Case”, *The Hill*, 16 October 2023, <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/4258552-judge-agrees-to-narrow-gag-order-limiting-trump-attacks-on-witnesses-in-jan-6-case/> (accessed on 4 December 2023) [75].
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house-coronavirus.html (accessed on 5 November 2021) [77]. See politics as show business in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985) [78].

These thoughts on outrageousness are informed by Deborah C. Stewart, Lisa Marchiano, and Joseph R. Lee, “Outrageous!: What Drives Shocking Behaviors”, 27 February 2020, in *This Jungian Life*, podcast, MP3 audio, 61:03, <https://thisjungianlife.com/episode-100-outrageous-what-drives-shocking-behaviors> (accessed on 5 November 2021) [79].

Xenophon, Plato’s contemporary, also wrote on the un/happiness of the tyrant. See his short dialogue Hiero in: Xenophon. *The Shorter Writings*. Edited by Gregory A. McBrayer. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018 [80].

Wilson Carey McWilliams, “Liberty, Equality, and the Problem of Community”, in *The Democratic Soul: A Wilson Carey McWilliams Reader*, ed. Patrick J. Deneen and Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 21–43 [81].

See McWilliams, “Liberty”, 39 [81].

McWilliams, “Liberty”, 22 [81].

There are other means of tempering individuals’ embrace of an unrestrained conception of freedom. For example, communitarians have argued that a revitalization of communal associations can be a buffer to rampant individualism, creating a check to the unmoored individual.

For an account of how an undemocratic conception of freedom came to prominence in contemporary democracies, see Annelien De Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020) [82].

That fragility was on full display in the storming of the Capitol, not to mention in the countless coup attempts endured by democracies around the world.

Consider the policies put forward in the journal *American Affairs*, a quarterly journal of public policy and political thought that originated in solidarity with what Trump represented for conservatism in the United States. Julius Krein, the founder of the journal, eventually denounced Trump after his response to the Unite the Right rally at Charlottesville in 2017 but continued facilitating a forum in which the meaning and future of conservatism could be explored. See “About *American Affairs*”, *American Affairs* (website), <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/about> (accessed on 18 October 2021) [83].

Those on the Left and the Right in the United States fear that the other side harbors such ambitions. Consider former US Attorney General William Barr’s description of the Left: “They’re not interested in compromise, they’re not interested in dialectic exchange of views. They’re interested in total victory.” Nathan Lane, “US Attorney General Barr Says the Left Wants to Tear Down the System”, Reuters, 9 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-congress-barr-idINKCN256053> (accessed on 5 November 2021) [84].

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Clinton, upon being defeated by Trump in the 2016 presidential race, followed Gore’s lead by speedily conceding. Later on, however, she would claim that Trump knew he was an “illegitimate president. Former president Jimmy Carter used similar language” when describing Trump’s presidency. Colby Itkowitz, “Hillary Clinton: Trump Is an ‘Illegitimate President,’” *Washington Post*, 6 September 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/hillary-clinton-trump-is-an-illegitimate-president/2019/09/26/29195d5a-e099-11e9-b199-f638bf2c340f_story.html (accessed on 5 November 2021) [87].

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The challenge of feeling like one is part of a large and plural nation has been an enduring puzzle in the United States, requiring different considerations by different citizens at different times. See James Baldwin, “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American”, in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (Boston: Beacon, 2021), 179–84 [92]; Samuel Goldman, *After Nationalism: Being American in an Age of Division* (College Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021) [93]; and Mehnaaz Momen, *The Paradox of Citizenship in American Politics: Ideals and Reality* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2017) [94].

See Paul W. Ludwig, *Rediscovering Political Friendship: Aristotle’s Theory and Modern Identity, Community, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) [95].

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