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**The 2020 Election: Understanding the Dispute**

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 During the last four years, Donald Trump has periodically claimed to be the victim of voter fraud. For example, after his 2016 electoral victory, he said it was fraud that led to his losing the popular vote by 3 million. He even set up a commission to investigate the matter which never produced any credible evidence. Before the 2020 election, he repeatedly claimed that the only way he could lose was by widespread fraud. After his 2020 defeat, the president unsuccessfully tried to overturn the results in various ways: filing over 60 lawsuits; urging state legislatures in battleground states to review the results and urging Vice President Pence to challenge the outcome at the January 6 joint session of Congress, convened to certify the vote of the Electoral College. Addressing the large crowd assembled to protest the election results, President Trump claimed he won the election in a landslide and that the election was stolen from him. Right to the end of his term, he reinforced this message by never explicitly conceding and by refusing the traditional courtesies of inviting Biden to the White House and attending his inauguration. Today, as a result, millions of Americans, about 28% of the population and 65% of Republicans think the election was stolen.

 To help clarify this situation, let us imagine a conversation between two friends, Kay, an evangelical Protestant Republican, who is convinced Trump won the election, and Sam, a practicing Catholic Democrat, who accepts the Electoral College results that Biden won. They agree to take turns expressing their opinions with the goal of understanding the other’s position better and not of changing the other’s mind.

Kay: I want to start with the role my Christian faith plays in my political positions. A decade ago, I turned my life over to Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, who shed his blood on the cross to forgive my sins. Christ helped me realize that our Christian way of life is under attack by godless forces: for example, traditional marriage is threatened by gay marriage, the sanctity of life by permissive abortion, and religious liberty by government interference. My pastor convinced me that the Supreme Court offers the best protection against these threats and that Republican candidates were most likely to appoint conservative judges. So, I voted for Trump and Republicans down-ballot in both 2016 and 2020.

Sam: I respect your religious convictions and am also very influenced by my Catholic faith and its social teaching. Christ came to redeem not only each one of us individually, but also the whole social order that is our habitat. Due to our baptism, we are called to spread God’s reign of justice and peace in the world. Christ’s command to love our neighbor demands participation in the political process, which helps humanize culture and create a just society where all human beings are secure and can flourish. Faithful discipleship demands faithful citizenship. Voting intelligently, which requires consideration of a candidate’s character as well as a whole range of policy issues, is a moral obligation. My conscience, formed by my Catholic faith, led me to vote for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020.

Sam: So, let’s talk about where we get our information about political affairs. I watch CNN and read articles of interest from the local newspaper. Before and after the election, I periodically tuned into Fox News, especially Laura Ingraham’s late evening commentary, which often reflected the thinking of President Trump.

Kay: I regularly watch Fox and periodically read the editorials in the *Wall Street Journal.* I try not to pay any attention to the mainstream media, like the *New York Times* and ABC News, because they are totally controlled by the Left. For five years, they have been biased against Trump, ignoring his good accomplishments and highlighting his personal faults. Just seventeen minutes into his presidency, the *Washington Post* brought up the possibility of his impeachment. The media mob constantly repeated the false narratives of Trump’s collusion with the Russians that was totally repudiated by the Mueller Report. The left-wing news sources all distorted the president’s perfectly fine phone conversation with Ukraine officials and supported the ridiculous impeachment charge soundly rejected by the Senate. Fox, the only news source I trust, has consistently brought to light the lies of the major networks and newspapers and the role they played in the election.

Sam: Let me jump in again, and bring up the issue of Trump’s character. I have to say right out that I detest the man and much of what he stands for. In saying that, I try to remember that only God can judge the human heart and that I should not presume to know Trump’s true motives. Perhaps I can say it this way: his rhetoric and actions reflect racist, sexist and xenophobic tendencies. What disturbs me most about Trump is not his extramarital affairs or shady business dealings, but his loose connection to the truth, to put it as charitably as I can. *The* *Washington Post* fact checkers last counted somewhere over two thousand false or misleading claims made by the president. For example, he has repeated over 400 hundred times the hyperbolic claim that he created the best economy in the history of the United States. The truth is that unemployment rates were lower under Eisenhower and GDP was higher for two quarters under Obama. I suppose that could be disputed, but my main point is that Trump has contributed to our post-truth situation, where alternate facts are proposed and prevarication is accepted as the new normal. Sometimes when I listen to Trump stray from the truth, I think he is consciously lying to make himself look good, but other times I think he is delusional and really believes what he is saying. As a prime example, I think he really believes he won the 2020 election. Either way, truth itself is subverted by his rhetoric. I think of Trump not only as morally flawed but as dangerous to democracy and the truth that sustains it.

Kay: Our perceptions are so different. I love Donald Trump with a passion. To me he is a savior figure, chosen by God, like the Persian King Cyrus in the Old Testament, to come to the aid of ordinary people like me. When I hear Trump speak at rallies, I feel like he understands me and so many others considered to be deplorables by the leftist elites. A major part of Trump’s appeal is that he not only attacks the left, but that he defeated them in 2016. Ordinary people dislike the left for various reasons. The elite make people like me feel inferior because we did not go to college. Individuals struggling financially feel ignored by leaders in both parties. People complain that the left does not respect their traditional culture, their traditional religion and their traditional status in society. Despite his flaws, 74 million citizens voted for Trump and many of us remain loyal to him because he is on our side in the great fight against leftist elites.

Kay: We better get to the heart of our dispute. I am usually a very logical person who relies on reason to justify my positions. In this case, however, I think Trump won the election because he repeatedly said he did and I tend to believe him. There is so much evidence of fraud: hundreds of affidavits signed by poll workers under oath, claiming voting irregularities; videos of boxes of ballots being suddenly found when observers were gone; and ballots accepted without checking signatures. Over 140 members of the House and at least two senators, Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley, raised objections to the Electoral College tally. Trump drew crowds so much bigger than Biden, making me think it is highly improbable that Trump actually lost. I am not sure anything could shake my faith in Donald Trump and his victory.

Sam: All the factual evidence supports the Biden victory. He won the popular vote by some 7 million votes and earned 306 electoral college votes, far more than the 270 needed. Every state certified their own election results with the consent of their governors and state legislatures. None of the 62 lawsuits filed by the Trump administration succeeded in changing the vote totals and all but one was dismissed without even considering the cases. Attorney General Bill Barr said there was no evidence of widespread voter fraud that would affect the outcome of the election. The Department of Homeland Security said the election was “the most secure in American history.” Even Fox News reported dissent from Trump’s position: Karl Rove, the architect of George W. Bush’s two presidential victories, said Trump’s false claims cost Republicans the two senate seats in Georgia; Senator Lindsey Graham told host Sean Hannity that it was time to accept Biden’s victory; and Geraldo Rivera, a good friend of Trump, said the president misled the American people with his big lie on the election results and bears responsibility for the mob attack on the Capital. For me, all the evidence indicates Biden won the election and Trump lost, an undeniable fact that at least a few Republican leaders have come to admit. The most prominent example is Mitch McConnell, who said on the Senate floor that President Trump fed lies to the mob that attacked the Capitol and was responsible for provoking them.

 This imagined example suggests some ways that those who accept the election results can deal with those who do not. At a personal level, they are our relatives, friends, and associates, who deserve charitable treatment. We know them not as racists or terrorists, but as good people who disagree with us politically. With some of them, it seems best to just ignore the topic and not talk about it because it will do more harm than good. In other cases, it might be possible to have a constructive conversation that strives to understand their position, especially their loyalty to Donald Trump and some of his policies.

From a political perspective, millions of the election deniers remain a potent political force. It is not likely that many will actually change their minds. Ignoring them, as some commentators have suggested, would not be a helpful strategy. They must be taken seriously and incorporated into the political calculation. Congress, divided as it is, has the challenging task of finding common ground and passing legislation that benefits the nation as a whole, including those who feel dispossessed. Even politicians who refuse to accept Biden as president can work together on pressing problems, such as controlling the virus, reviving the economy and rebuilding our infrastructure.

In general terms, we must all do what we can to counter “the big lie” about the election that created the vexing division in the first place. This mass deception threatens respect for truth, our democratic way of life and the tradition of a peaceful transition of power. As we move forward, let us thank God that our democratic institutions have survived intact this assault and ask God to guide our shared effort to create a more perfect union.