

Political Ads & Midterm Elections

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia invaded Ukraine as follow-up to its annexation of Crimea in 2014 (February 24, 2022). While seeking to lower the temperature of this country's inflamed rhetoric, but also convey an urgency felt around the globe, President Biden framed Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a choice between autocracy and democracy. The invasion of Ukraine caused Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II, with more than 6.1 million Ukrainians fleeing the country, and more than 850,000 internally displaced as of July 3, 2022. Poland provided refuge for a huge number of the refugees, as did other neighboring countries, and also the United States. The president's statement about not wanting to start World War III reminded people of the apocalyptic destruction and lose-lose threat posed by nuclear weapons. The invasion also strengthened the NATO alliance of nations that do not want war, but rather peaceful co-existence with their neighbors. We can take some pride in affirming our NATO alliance because it shows we do not always have to agree with each other's way of life before we can care about something larger than ourselves, i.e., humanity—and therefore seek to live humanely and peacefully by foregoing the use of force to change any nation's boundaries. Pope Francis spoke out against war itself: "There was a time, even in our churches, when people spoke of a holy war or a just war. Today we cannot speak in this manner. A Christian awareness of the importance of peace has developed. Wars are always unjust since it is the people of God who pay."¹ But shortly before Christmas, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, flush from being named *Time Magazine's* 2022 Person of the Year and immensely popular in the Congress, was back home in Kyiv after his trip to Washington "helped secure a new \$1.8 billion military aid package" for Ukraine and disaster relief.² PBS Political pundits David Brooks and Jonathan Capehart had spoken of Zelensky as "our generation's Churchill" due to Zelensky's resolute fight for freedom and refusal to surrender that resonated with many Americans who see themselves similarly.³ In response to Russia's aggression, Americans were unexpectedly reintroduced to the idea of common sacrifice, which perhaps humbled the ways we went about pursuing some of our goals. Inflation spread like a new Covid variation, but far less mentioned by the media was that a majority of Americans had favored a show of support for Ukraine even if that meant higher gas prices for them. Many found value in sacrificing for a cause in which they found meaning.

Despite the higher gas prices, AAA reported millions took to the road in celebration of the 2022 Fourth of July weekend. Boston Pops Conductor Keith Lockhart said he was grateful that for the first time in three years, we had each other to come together to celebrate the 2022 Boston Pops Concert and Fireworks Spectacular at the Hatch Memorial Shell on the Charles River Esplanade.⁴ So it was not impossible for Americans to sacrifice and to celebrate! On August 26, 2022, the James Webb telescope captured its first picture of Mars, and humanity discovered breathtakingly beautiful images of universes not yet imagined. Launched on Christmas Eve, 2021, the "high infrared resolution and sensitivity of the largest optic telescope in space" ... allow it to view objects either too early, distant, or far out for the Hubble Telescope.⁵ Ukraine celebrated its independence day on August 23, 2022, despite a train station being pummeled that resulted in at least 22 people killed. The see-saw of war would then tip in Ukraine's favor as it began a counter-offensive against Russian forces and took back some occupied territories.⁶ On November 14, 2022, Russia withdrew troops from the port city of Kherson. But Russia's winter bombing campaign disabled much of Ukraine's energy grid and plunged millions into darkness for days on end. Rolling blackouts were expected to remain at least through the winter, and freezing temperatures added to the suffering caused by disrupted energy networks.⁷ A large nuclear reactor in Ukraine remains vulnerable.⁸ The unwelcome chaos from ongoing war in Ukraine now vied with the cacophony of accelerated rhetorical violence within the U.S. This became particularly apparent in political ads for the 2022 midterm elections. The sordidness of ads for the 2022 midterm elections by both political parties reminded me why I choose to remain an unaffiliated voter. Political ads have never been a hallmark of intelligence, but in 2022, they seemed competing for a new low. Most were toxic, absent a sense of the other's humanity—absent even common decency.

Today, only a small fraction of Americans, 16-23%, approve of the job Congress does.⁹ At the end of the year, a Marist College Center for Public Opinion poll found 58% of Americans had no confidence in the ways "political parties can work together."¹⁰ In both 2020 and 2021, neither party had accomplished significant change in some of the pressing issues of our time: gerrymandering on both sides, protection of voting rights for all, unfettered access to the guns that make possible mass gun violence, a forever-broken immigration system, outdated infrastructure, outsized inequality, inadequate child daycare, mental health care for all, increased global warming, runaway drug prices, no enforcement of our already feeble anti-trust laws, inadequate regulation on the spread of disinformation and AI by Big Brother-like tech titans, invasions of privacy, a runaway national debt, and lack of ethical and regulatory oversight to provide transparent accounting of taxpayer money. I continue to question the "values" that many seem to hail only during election cycles. In North Carolina, primaries for the 2022 midterm elections had come and gone with a sense of *déjà vu*: familiar accusations designed to elicit fear and anger read like worn-out, party-line talking points. The usual stereotypes and branding substituted for critical thinking on issues that, ironically, in May, 2022, millions of Americans alike faced in common. Ads for Ted Budd, reportedly already a millionaire, stated he would "defend your North Carolina values."¹¹ A Winston-Salem business belonging to Budd's family received "a maximum \$10 million Paycheck Protection Program loan" for The Budd Group, a facility services business employing about 500 people¹² that has grown into a business "currently worth an estimated \$100 million," which caused some to wonder—wasn't the Paycheck Protection Program intended to keep *small* businesses afloat?¹³ In the closely watched race, Budd also received infusions of cash from billionaires and Trump's Super PAC.¹⁴ Trump had declared Ted Budd "rock solid," and Budd celebrated his narrow win as rejection of Biden's policies, which continues to be a goal for several Republicans and a strategy to block more agenda.¹⁵ In an ad shouting "Sandy Smith is too dangerous for NC," personal problems and driving records were dug up.¹⁶ Ads made Wiley Nickel out to be surely the worst person who had ever lived! An ad paid for by the Congressional Leadership Committee states, "Wiley Nickel will represent the worst in society."¹⁷ Personal smearing was everywhere apparent; substantive content everywhere absent.

The ads did not highlight misplaced loyalties, controversial votes, or even bad policies. Rather, many depicted other candidates simply as bad human beings, leaving voters to wonder why we should want any of them. Another candidate, Devon Barbour, claimed to be "pro-gun, pro-family, conservative." But I venture a guess that most families—Republicans, Democrats, and unaffiliated—are all anti-unregulated guns, particularly given that in 2020 guns overtook automobiles as the leading cause of death of our young people (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). The massacre at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, that left 19 children and two teachers dead was just one of 614 mass shootings in the United States reported by the Gun Violence Archive during 2022.¹⁸ In fact, pro-gun and pro-family seem to be an oxymoron, since most families would like to see their children go to school unafraid of being shot dead as well as un-traumatized by hearing and seeing their friends, teachers, and other people shot dead. Conservative "family values" also ring hollow when so many put political survival before standing up for truth about the 2020 election. My guess is most families teach their children differently. U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken explained on *60 Minutes* the upside down world that not only typifies the rhetoric of Russia's war with Ukraine, but is also "the Achilles heel of autocracies anywhere: ... there is usually not anyone who has the capacity or the will to speak truth to power."¹⁹ We hear of "traitors who cross the aisle," despite knowing that, to be effective, those in Congress are not traitors, but rather must work across the aisle! The "us vs. them" mentality-of-war reinforced divisions the pandemic had fostered rather than thinking of each party as a check on the other while also balanced by common concerns for the good of all. Gov. Larry Hogan (R-Maryland) spoke of rhetoric taken from the "performative art school of politics" that led to America being "too divided to believe in itself."²⁰ Perhaps some of the rhetorical violence and toxic partisanship permeating ads was due to mental stress caused by the pandemic. But all of it? A frequent and very obvious fallacy in human logic is the ad hominem attack. This error in logic occurs when a speaker diverts attention away from an issue by making accusations about a person—tearing down a person—rather than addressing the issue under discussion logically and objectively. Consider the "hearings" Congress holds regularly. Many are televised and appeal to those members of Congress who regularly use ad hominem attacks to bring themselves more media attention.

The disrespect for others could be resolved if every time a member of Congress railed against a person testifying rather than an issue, the committee chair docked the Congress person one minute of their speaking time. Calling out ad hominem attacks as logical errors might restore some civility to Congressional hearings and demonstrate simple respect for other human beings. In a rare, intelligent ad that ran in North Carolina, Cheri Beasley claimed, "Neither political party is getting it right."²¹ She pointed out "sixty-four members of Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike have broken a law to stop insider stock trading, yet Washington has refused to do anything about it."²² Beasley proposed a solution and explained her reasoning: "Let's ban members of Congress from buying stocks all together. Senators should be working for you, not themselves."²³ Imagine such a daring idea—akin to that of expecting a president to place country ahead of self. Here, senators would put the people they are elected to represent ahead of self-interests. And imagine Congress adhering to its own ethics to regulate itself. A common sense, former judge, backed by many in law enforcement, Beasley was now falsely depicted, with funding from the Senate Leadership PAC, as wanting "IRS agents [to audit] the middle class and [harass] small businesses." Her opponent Ted Budd had voted against certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election. He had called the January 6 insurrectionists at the Capitol "patriots," and now approved an ad insinuating Beasley would somehow be to blame if a "serial child rapist" roamed and endangered neighborhoods: "Our children won't be safe with Cheri Beasley."²⁴ I found this race particularly disturbing because I was not previously aware that Congressional Leadership Committees and the Senate Leadership PAC *sponsored* these ads! The Senate Leadership Fund is a Republican super PAC that was established in 2015 by allies of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to "protect and expand the Republican Senate Majority."²⁵ But isn't it a blatant conflict of interest for so-called "leadership" committees to promote only members of their own party? Shouldn't "leadership" committees be more open to welcoming new voices to the table? The national committee's purpose involves oversight of the presidential nominating process as well as supporting party candidates with research, polling and funding in races across the country. Each party also has two Hill committees, one each for the House and Senate, which are dedicated to helping elect candidates from their party to Congress and incumbents win re-election.

These committees were each among the top 15 spenders in the 2022 congressional elections with a combined \$1.8 billion in spending.²⁶ The built-in bias does not seem well thought out because it means those in office have an advantage to "re-inherit" their positions—as long as they fall in line—over anyone with new ideas and who might bring different approaches to unresolved problems. It seems the two parties themselves, then, have entrenched and anti-democratic ways of deciding who runs and which candidates the public gets to "choose." Inheritance might not be a throne, but this fixed ideological "inheritance" preempts new approaches to solving old problems. With the increase of voters who are non-partisan and independent, the system needs to change. (See, for example, chapter 5c: "Creative Change" on the non-partisan, non-profit called "Unite America.") We might create real change in the candidates we elect by noticing who relies on clichés, labels, and stereotypes and who *supports* claims with sound reasoning and accomplishments rather than speculations and/or future promises. "Liberal," "socialist," and "conservative" labeling will hopefully be laid to rest by a fast-growing, younger and independent public that rejects the absence of thought behind such stereotyping. Thus, we might use *critical thinking* before deciding who to represent us—if we want people of conscience who are interested in helping unify the country with different approaches and concerns to well thought-out policies. We do not need over-regulation, nor an absence of regulatory policies. But we are much in need of wise regulation. We might elect representatives who find ways to balance best practices from what are each party's main concerns regarding particular issues. Then, as retired Army Colonel Denton Knapp, a former candidate in the Wyoming Republican primary recognized, at some point debates about policy need to become practical; they need to be carried out—not just blocked so that gridlock becomes a way to forever kick the can—i.e., the hard work—down the road.²⁷ President Biden worked quietly through the chaos he inherited, keeping campaign promises, and trying to help average, working Americans by transitioning to an economy built from the middle out and bottom up rather than ceding to the past and the same top-down rhetoric that for years has polarized us politically by dividing us into an economy of 1% and 99%.

In 2021, "the wealth of the top 1% increased by \$6.5 trillion."²⁸ The Federal Reserve released a 2023 study showing the wealthiest sliver of America controls a third (32%) of the country's wealth. Biden thinks tax loopholes on capital gains should be closed so that corporations and the very rich pay their "fair share" of taxes. Excess consolidation of wealth and power contributes to a decline of democracy as much as do external dictatorships because the vast divide between 1% and 99% creates *internal* monopolies of power operating as autocracies *behind the scenes*. Both parties had argued the future of democracy and the country was at stake, a theme that seemed to resonate with voters fearful for the country's future. As happens often, party divisions came down to courting independent and new, younger voters. Before resigning from office in January, 2019, Jeff Flake's remarks were prescient: "We must never regard as 'normal' the regular and casual undermining of our democratic norms and ideals... the flagrant disregard for truth or decency... A political career doesn't mean much if we are complicit in undermining those values."²⁹ During his campaign for senate in Arizona, Blake Masters, a far-right supporter of Trump, conceded his primary may have "got a little mean."³⁰ Earlier, he had remarked, "Do you know how many independents I meet who say: 'Bring back the mean tweets because we want \$2 gas? We want a border. We want a country that works.'"³¹ What Masters overlooked was that a number of independents and others are *willing to sacrifice* to pay more for gas to stand with the people of Ukraine; many *are demanding* more effective border regulations, but ones that are also *humane*. Even more so, many independents *do want* "a country that works," but not with mean tweets, but rather with fairmindedness and civility. Our so-called "different realities" can be better appreciated if we present them as specific contributions designed to help solve specific issues common to the nation. The Governors' Meeting in Chapter 4c provides a successful example of doing just that.