The Politics of Freedom: Two Parties, Two Visions

by Dylan Dwyer

> "I believe in a future where every person has the opportunity not just to get by, but to get ahead." – Kamala Harris 2024

I am forced to be a Democrat. I say this at a time when the rift between America's two political parties continues to widen. The 2024 general election gave me another reminder of these stark differences and escalating tensions. I understand our two-party system to be fairly unique compared to other democracies; all complexities of politics are effectively constrained into two buckets from which the voter must choose. This limitation forces each side to hold a wide set of values and opinions which differs them from the opposing party. The parties are not spiteful contrarians; rather, each party differs out of ideological necessity. Opposing ideologies, in theory, often lead to opposing solutions to societal problems. I argue that at the core of ideological disagreement between Democrats and Republicans is a different interpretation of what it means to be free. Freedom is the reason an American supports or opposes vaccine mandates, the reason an American views January 6th of 2021 as a disgracement or an embodiment of American values, and the reason I am forced to vote blue.

I am a first generation college student. After high school, I remember seeing friends committing to big-name schools with flashy celebrations and social media posts. I could not help but feel out-of-the-loop when talking to others about career aspirations and life after high school. I was not an exceptional student by any means, and college seemed like it was not a path for the unexceptional–or those who could not front the cost. I had no reference for college life or how to obtain it; I relied on movies to inform me of what college was because I had no one to educate me. I was lost for a while. Gradually, through self reflection and reading, I started to believe that higher

education was the remedy to my stagnation: "I don't know what I will do with my life yet, but I know I will achieve greatness, and college is the first step." I was working two jobs, seven days a week after high school. I found downtimes in my shifts to read, journal, and research; I was inspired to reach further than anyone before me. Through relentless research and communication, I was able to enroll at a local community college. Although I viewed community college as my only available option at the time and a stepping stone, it gave me great confidence that I was doing *it*, and it taught me important lessons in the process. My attitude towards education was unlike it was in high school; I fought to be here and I will not take it for granted. Through passionate and caring (and tough) professors, I fell in love with learning and the different subject matter. To me, I did not care if it was history, writing, calculus, psychology, or business–I was equally curious and driven for all. With more research and relentless communication, but this time with the help and encouragement of my professors and faculty, I was able to find a fitting spot for me–Hartwick College. Hartwick was a drive upstate from me, offered me a price that was slightly less than insurmountable, allowed opportunity for me to continue my athletic passion, and had the perfect student-professor ratio for my obnoxious curiosity. I am grateful for the help that got me here, and I am happy I resisted the path that was already laid out for me: no college and a life of physical labor, like my father.

I often wonder what made me different ("why am I here when those before me, or those like me, were not able or willing to do so?"). After all, there was nothing directly, or by a matter of law, stopping people like my father from attending college. My father was a victim of an alcoholic and abusive household, poor and couch surfing since sixteen years old. He was one of many 'degenerates'

among his rowdy friends in South Yonkers, New York. Dad was seemingly doomed by the time he graduated high school, a high school that he infrequently attended. My father's negative relationship with school was his own fault, of course, but undoubtedly a consequence of his home life, indifferent teachers, and other influences. Unexpected life events also complicated my father's prospects; first, he witnessed the death and mutilation of multiple friends after a friend's foolish stunt of drunk driving, then–a couple years later–he tragically lost his girlfriend to cancer. The roadblocks in my father's life proved to limit his ability to access better opportunities. My father lacked the merit and qualifications for higher education, but more importantly he lacked the motivation and desire to exceed expectation, it was not instilled in him–possibility and potential were severely limited. Sure, technically my father was *allowed* to pursue higher education just as an affluent kid attending a prep school in Manhattan could, but he did not have an equal *ability* to do so. While I have had my fair share of adversity, my father ensured that I would be in a more *able* position than he was. Unlike him, I was given the opportunity, knowledge, and environment to craft and pursue my ambitions, for which I am forever grateful. The contrast between our paths after high school reveals an important distinction between allowance and ability, and the comparison between my father and I hints toward fundamental differences in the interpretation of what it means to be free.

Freedom is a highly held ideal of most people, especially among Americans. However, all Americans do not agree on a single meaning of freedom. We can look at political and philosophical precedent to distinguish definitions of freedom. Isaiah Berlin, a twentieth century Russian-British political philosopher, proposed *Two Concepts of Liberty* in his 1958 Oxford lecture: *negative freedom*

and *positive freedom*. Negative freedom refers to Thomas Hobbes's concept of liberty which views freedom as the absence of outside interference upon an individual–the 'freedom from.' The negative concept of freedom views outside agents as physically oppressive and, through coercion and interference, a limiter of an individual's freedom. A free individual in the negative sense is *allowed* to do as they please. On the other hand, Berlin describes positive freedom as self-mastery, the freedom from physical and psychological roadblocks (e.g., harm, illness, hedonism, ignorance)–the 'freedom to.' The positive concept of freedom views outside agents as a potential means of ensuring and enriching freedom. A free individual in the positive sense is *able* to do as they *truly* please.

For a holistic understanding of Berlin's concept of positive freedom, it is useful to connect his ideas with Abraham Maslow's concept of a *hierarchy of needs*. Maslow was a twentieth century American psychologist who proposed a stepwise approach to human well-being and life satisfaction. The hierarchy states that people must establish certain fundamental needs before other, high-level supplementary needs; the rank of needs from most fundamental to highest order is as follows: physiological, safety (security), love (belonging), esteem, and *self-actualization*. Maslow's sequential steps can be described as physical and psychological roadblocks to positive freedom. Once the basic physical needs are satisfied, followed by the psychological, final high-level *self-mastery* (esteem and self-actualization) can be obtained. The themes of Berlin's self-mastery and positive freedom are reflected in Maslow's description of self-actualization, "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is *capable* of becoming" (Maslow, 1943). Berlin's positive freedom and Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggest that in order to be free one must not only be allowed to do as

they please but they must also be ensured of their fundamental needs, obtain knowledge and conscientiousness, and develop the ability to realize their full potential.

Government should serve the interest of the people while providing stability and safety to society. However, conflict emerges when the 'interest of the people' differ. While, on the surface, 'maximizing freedom' seems to be an uncontested ideal of almost all Americans, there are substantial schisms among the people for how to pursue, or even define, maximum freedom–as I previously outlined. Americans who believe in the negative interpretation of freedom would more often agree that the government should stay out of personal matters. Generally, these Americans would want less taxes, less government-run programs, and less government-issued mandates. Negative freedom argues that the minimization of government interference allows the people to act freely and pursue happiness as they wish. Although government interference limits negative freedom, most Americans with this interpretation still believe in the existence of government at least to the extent that it deters individuals from harming one another, or the extent that government serves to limit the interference of other agents (e.g., foreign nations or large companies). On the contrary, and more aligned with my beliefs, positive freedom would argue that the government should be involved in personal matters to the extent that maximizes the people's total ability and potential–striving for self-mastery and fulfilling one's hierarchy of needs. I would agree with my fellow Americans who hold the positive interpretation that the government should serve to eliminate roadblocks and help people fulfill their basic needs (e.g., free school lunch or access to healthcare). If people are ensured of their basic needs they can seek higher-level goals and realize their potential; people can live more fulfilling lives, maximizing their

autonomy and contribution to society. Practically, examples of governmental actions that reflect the goals of positive freedom could be increasing taxes for the high class and utilizing government-run programs to serve people's needs. Americans like freedom, but they disagree along party lines on the policies and government's role.

The 2024 general election underlined the fundamental difference between both parties: negative freedom Republicans and positive freedom Democrats. Each party and respective nominees intertwine their interpretation of freedom into their policies and platforms. In the broadest sense, Harris's platform believed in the government's potential to empower whereas Trump's platform believed in the government's threat to destroy: a race between hope and fear; progress and conservation; change and safety. In the end, fear overpowered hope, as it often does. The America that MAGA Republicans alluded to during the election is an America with less government interference–more negative freedom. Needless to say, I wholeheartedly disagree with the sentiment that a great America is one of a hands-off government. Instead, I stand with the Democratic sentiment that a great America is not one where its government turns a blind eye, but rather an America whose government ensures roadblocks to a fulfilling life are eliminated, an America whose government ensures that individual potential can be realized–more positive freedom.

Donald Trump and the 2024 Republican Party promised Americans freedom through non-interference. The fear utilized during the election cycle was based out of pre-existing American anxieties. It is natural to be concerned for the safety and security of one's work, relationships, and way of life. The presence, let alone the active interference, of the government poses a powerful threat to

one's security, a possible disruptor of one's way of life. It is this rational basis that helps me understand my fellow American–it makes sense. It makes sense that COVID-19 mandates or the utilization of taxpayer dollars to fund seemingly abstract welfare programs are characterized by the GOP as an attack on the freedom of Americans. Trump and his party pointed to all sorts of domains that they believe are unjustly interfered with by the government: claims of rigged and unfair elections that misrepresent public opinion; beliefs that DEI initiatives are attempts to unjustly appoint under qualified individuals over others who are better deserving; sentiment that the government willingly allows too many undocumented people to migrate into the country, threatening American people and the economy. The Republican Party's campaign framed government as the ultimate interferer, the ultimate threat to American safety and security, and the ultimate antithesis to freedom.

Kamala Harris and the 2024 Democratic Party quickly rallied behind freedom through opportunity. Harris's campaign tapped into the American people's optimistic vision. Common fears were acknowledged, but there was an emphasis on an idea that every American should have the ability to secure their safety and aspire for more. The Democratic Party believes that the United States government's centralized capacity to provide and protect the American people is unlike any other agent. The nation's power is a cumulation of the work of its people. In modern society we rely on our fellow Americans and our governments to function effectively. It is this reason why the government's role in maximizing freedom is of utmost importance–assuming a positive interpretation of freedom. It is the duty of the government–a government empowered by the people's work and controlled by the people's vote–to ensure that the needs of its citizens are met and that they are endowed with the

components to achieve self-mastery. Under this Democratic line of reasoning, it makes sense as to why the Democratic Party saw it as the government's responsibility to ensure public safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, or why the party values welfare programs as a mechanism to enhance the freedom of Americans. Harris's campaign emphasized the potential of government to increase American well-being and freedoms: government programs can lower drug costs and make healthcare affordable so Americans can fulfill their health needs; government can ensure access to housing; government can protect against workplace discrimination; government can guarantee access to high quality public education (K-12 and higher education) so that Americans can aspire for more. The Democratic Party sees government as the ultimate mechanism to minimize roadblocks and maximize opportunity, the ultimate tool to increase freedom.

It is the Democratic vision of positive freedom that brings about a better life for Americans. The 2024 Democratic Party wanted to realize freedom through empowering the people whereas the 2024 Republican Party chose to realize freedom through the limitation of government's interference–despite the fact that the government, in theory, is an extension of the people's will within a democratic republic. The interpretations of freedom that I have assigned to each party are generally applicable. However, politics is complicated and warrants nuance. Our two-party system results in all ideals being restricted into one of two buckets: Democratic and Republican. Such simplification of the complexities of politics and ideology leaves ample room for further ideological and policy distinctions or acceptions within each party (e.g., authoritarian vs libertarian; or differences between domains: social, economic, and foreign affairs). For example, Donald Trump ran on eliminating government

interference and embracing isolationism (libertarian objectives), but he has also called for expansion of executive power and restriction of the press (authoritarian objectives). Similarly, an individual's interpretation of freedom and liberty is not always consistent across time or domain; other factors contribute towards people's fluid understanding of freedom. It is important to acknowledge the complexity when analyzing politics.

Our nation's political divide continues to deepen; we are not understanding one another. The lens of freedom serves as a useful way to empathize with the 'other side.' I understand why Republicans fear for their freedoms under the constant threat of our powerful government (negative interpretation of freedom, 'the freedom from'). Similarly, I hope a Republican can understand why Democrats fear losing their freedoms because of unmet needs and insurmountable roadblocks (positive interpretation of freedom, 'the freedom to'). Broadly, in the 2024 general election, the Democratic Party championed freedom through opportunity while the Republican Party championed freedom through non-interference. People like my father were allowed to dream big and exceed expectations, but they did not have the ability to do so. People like me are allowed to dream big and exceed expectations, *and* we are put into the environment and given the required resources to realize our potential. Interference is not the sole threat to freedom, one must fulfill their hierarchy of needs and achieve self-mastery to *truly* be free. It is this distinction between allowance and ability that reveals freedom's true meaning as freedom through opportunity as opposed to freedom through non-interference. I believe that this important distinction is what separates people into their partisan bucket: the 'positive' freedom

Democrats and the 'negative' freedom Republicans. Freedom is why I am a Democrat, and it is also the reason my fellow American is Republican.

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