

LETTERS TO BARODA CITIZENS

From BILL HURST, Baroda Township Treasurer
September 26th, 2022

My name is Bill Hurst, Baroda Township Treasurer, appointed in November 2021. I am running for re-election this year, to serve through November 2024.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve the Township. Day to day, as Treasurer I collect, track and distribute taxes to fund Township services such as fire, police, rubbish pickup, ambulance, roads, cemetery, and public infrastructure such as parks and public buildings. The Treasurer along with the Clerk receives revenues and pays bills from our funds. Much of the job is routine, but proper execution is necessary. More challenging and satisfying is my role as a voting member of the Township counsel, where I participate in decision-making and budgeting. I agreed to be the Treasurer during my retirement years to be of service, not to supplement my savings.

While I am running unopposed this November, I plan several communications to you and a Zoom call to hear your reactions. Why am I spending significant dollars and time to communicate to you when I am unopposed? More significantly, why should I risk ruffling feathers through these communications? (I expect to ruffle feathers, as you will understand shortly.)

Here is the answer. In this time of peril to our democracy, it is incumbent on those of us who value our republic, who fear decades-in-the-making risks to our democracy which have now reached a crisis stage since the 2020 election, to speak out and encourage fellow citizens to come together to preserve our 240+ year old democratic experiment. This must be done on a local as well as a national level.

I hope to provide a narrative of causes, impacts and potential solutions so we can together persuade other voters to act to preserve our democracy. I will recommend legislation, candidates, and a framework for thinking about our democracy which will move beyond the shallow tropes so common in our social media. In presenting evidence of what ails our democracy and what we need to do to fix it, I will not “dumb down the message” or reduce my message to slogans, despite advice to do so.

Also, because I believe our politics have been hi-jacked by the extremes, I will defend a centrist brand of democracy (“liberal democracy” as classically defined) which until recently governed behavior of both Republicans and Democrats. And where facts are well established, I will not avoid using a preponderance of evidence to debunk falsehoods which threaten our democracy. (I welcome opposing facts if you will admit you are wrong if your evidence doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. A rational “open forum” is critical to democracy.)

As a realist, I do not expect to persuade all of you, not even a majority of you, and maybe only those rare 5% or less of you who are swing voters who do think independently. For the rest, on both sides of the aisle, I recognize that insulated group-think, combined with a hefty helping of tribal animosity towards the other side, makes open communication and debate a challenge.

A broad thesis I will press is that liberal democracy is under pressure from both left and right, from the left culturally, and from the right politically:

- On the left, a cultural movement based on boundless expansion of norms of individual personal identity, has been politicized in institutional settings (such as colleges) by those who insist on enforcing opaque norms of verbal political correctness mistakenly designed to protect minorities and fragmented cultural groups. Speech deemed to violate those norms is attacked. Violators are shamed and careers sometimes damaged. Associated with “cancel culture” is a dismissal of role-based identity based on the unhealthy myth that individuals must “create themselves” rather than follow well-established identities and roles in existing institutions such as the trades, professions, the military and government service. (It doesn’t help that so many of you on right and left immaturely reject the validity and expertise of these institutions, as illustrated during the Covid 19 pandemic, instead of being committed to strengthen them.) Partly in reaction, “cancel culture” has been adopted by the right and has saturated our politics, resulting in histrionics from both sides. The resulting “culture wars” substitutes symbolic conflict for governing solutions. Many culture war issues cannot be solved by government and culture war rhetoric needs to be dialed down.
- On the right, the Republican Party is now the party of Trump, and has adopted his “Big Lie” (easily proved to be a lie) that the 2020 election was stolen. Trump has done tremendous damage to our democracy through undermining faith in our elections, without evidence. Following his lead, many grass roots Republicans now insist or acquiesce in the falsehood that Joe Biden is not our legitimately elected President. More serious, based on this lie, our election infrastructure is being threatened by many nominated 2022 Republican office holders and activists who are prepared to reject future election results that do not go their way. Deeper analysis of the populist wave in the Republican Party shows its resemblance to populist movements around the world, which in former full democracies such as Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and the Philippines, have enabled opportunistic leaders to curtail democracy – restricting freedom of press, independence of judges, citizen rights – in order to stay in power. Trump himself has eroded democracy’s guardrails both when he was President, and now after, most severely through the “big lie” and now through violation of procedures and laws protecting classified documents which he claims do not apply to him.

The risk to our democracy from threats to non-partisan voting processes and erosion of state institutions and norms is our immediate political risk, and we must stop its progression. But we must figure out how to defuse cultural issues, separating those which are life choices for both groups and individuals and so should exist free from political interference, from those which represent public goods which should be encouraged by economic and political incentives, from those which have cultural and economic implications and require political choices (such as immigration).

My agenda in these “Letters to Baroda Citizens” involves promoting a framework which dials down the culture wars and promotes “no-labels”, centrist issue positions which will displease many Democrats and Republicans. For example, I will send a letter addressing the topic of immigration. This key issue if “solved” properly, will benefit the US immensely, and will defuse a significant flash point in our politics. My solution will displease many Democrats and Republicans. At a recent meeting, billed as a talk on immigration policy, I gently criticized the speaker for only addressing her organization’s work assisting amnesty seekers (I praised the specific work), and for not addressing the overall issue of immigration. My criticism was dismissed as heartless. Donald Trump’s solution to “build a wall, paid for by Mexico”, is not just a lie, but it is inefficient, ineffective, and a political dog-whistle; it is not a solution to the immigration problem. The US is the only country in the world where uniting families is our key criteria

for immigration. Going forward, we need immigrants and temporary workers, including the best and the brightest as well as workers who will do the jobs we won't do, along with enhanced border control and restrictions with teeth on hiring illegals. And those who were born here decades ago need to be legalized and encouraged to work towards citizenship. Some do not like to hear the truth that as a country we have the moral right to choose our immigrants and then have immigrants adopt our language and creed, with a reciprocal obligation to help them succeed. Some do not like to hear that politicization of the issue by the likes of Trump is intended to prolong the issue. (As I will lay out, Trump could have proceeded step-by-step if he wanted to solve the issue; it's clear he did not want to solve it as it provided him a dog-whistle to rile up his base.)

To sum up, these "Letters to Baroda Citizens" have several goals:

1. highlighting the threats to our democracy and providing a framework for analyzing them
2. encouraging a community to emerge to protect our democracy
3. encouraging that community to vote for candidates who will protect our democracy and support legislation to safeguard our democracy,
4. presenting a no-labels, pragmatic framing of our political situation and associated solutions,
5. encouraging support of this no-labels centrist program.

Here are some topics I will cover before the election in several letters. Note that I will eventually substitute online distribution for print, sending you a postcard of their availability, and I will schedule one or two Zoom calls to hear your views. Those who disagree with my viewpoints are encouraged to attend and speak out politely to offer other viewpoints.

Topics to be covered include:

1. **The threat of democratic back-sliding, with the most urgent and immediate risk occurring from establishment of partisan voting processes. How can you promote laws and candidates to prevent this risk to democracy from materializing?** Trump did not invent democratic back-sliding in the US (or the world), but he has accelerated it through misinformation (he lies often and as a matter of course, but misinformation goes beyond lying) and weakening democratic guardrails, institutions, and norms (such as calling the press the "enemy of the people", which is a tactic used in authoritarian regimes to give misinformation credibility).

His disregard for democracy culminated in his ongoing lie that the 2020 election was stolen. As Republican Liz Cheney made clear in the Jan. 6th hearings, Trump systematically attempted to reverse the 2020 election results. We narrowly averted a coup, avoided in part due to Republicans like Trump loyalist Bill Barr who resisted his lie. The accuracy of the 2020 results in key States were confirmed by Trump-supporting Republicans in Georgia (Raffensperger, Kemp), Trump sponsored Ninja's in Arizona, and Trump Michigan Senate Republicans' who published an election study (<https://www.misenategop.com/senate-oversight-committee-releases-report-on-november-2020-general-election/>) which looked for and did not find fraud in the 2020 Michigan vote.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of accurate 2020 results, the Trump lie has been adopted as a loyalty test by Trump, the Republican party and a large portion of its base, with the Party promoting and passing state laws and nominating state officials to enable 2022 and 2024 rejection of election

results it doesn't like. My letter, besides examining the 2020 election in detail, will discuss what you can do to prevent an immediate authoritarian crisis in our elections by voting against election deniers and supporting key reforms. There are a host of reforms recommended by experts to secure our election system from partisan tampering. For example, a revision to the Electoral Count Act of 1887, whose weaknesses Trump worked to exploit in 2020/2021, needs to be passed by Congress. Potential reforms to protect voting rights and the vote count will be reviewed. And Republicans need to take back their Party by rejecting the "Big Lie".

2. **The threat of "wokeness" and fragmented identity politics to our democracy.** An overview of identity politics gone extreme, starting on the left, and then imitated by the right, and a framework for moderating identity conflicts in a liberal republic, while respecting groups and individual choice, with a restored role for institutionalized roles and identity, including renewed national pride, national service, and a common creed. We need to dial down the culture wars.
3. **Immigration reform with an eye towards "Who we Are", as opposed to piecemeal reform.** Canadians have a larger foreign-born population than we do, but overall, like their system and their immigrants. We need immigration reform which meets national objectives. We also need to assimilate immigrants who are here in support of a unified, national understanding of "who we are".
4. **Economic inequality and its role in fostering populism, and what needs to be done. What economic policies should you vote for? How can we promote fiscal responsibility to avoid upcoming crises in Medicaid and Social Security.** In a liberal republic, there will always be tension between individual freedom and inequality, but in the US the plutocracy (the donor class) has gained control of the tax system and economy, in part by using culture wars to get the working class to do its bidding. For example, in 2017, in a time of full employment, the rich again got a tax cut, increasing the deficit substantially without improving economic performance. There is no reason capital should be taxed lower than labor; reform is needed so the rich (400K salary and up) pay much higher rates on income and especially on capital gains.

In looking at our economic system, you, the voter, often look at economic results through your biased political lens. Macroeconomics, international economics, exogenous shocks versus internal policy are difficult to boil down. For example, did Obama or Trump do the most to move the US to oil self-sufficiency? The answer is: neither of them. Most of the increased production, due to fracking, occurred under Obama; the actual attainment of self-sufficiency occurred early in the Trump administration. Presidential influence on economic performance is often exaggerated. The economic results from three administrations (Obama, Trump and Biden) will be compared, with overall lessons extracted about our underlying need for fiscal responsibility and rational budgeting.

5. **A Look at Potential Political Reforms.** It is undeniable that both Parties are flawed; we will discuss how they are flawed. What is the role of political parties anyway and do we need them? (Yes, we do.) Deeper systemic flaws, rooted in our constitutional structure, are causing our dysfunction. In response to our "first past the post" electoral system, what can be done to systematically allow new voices and new parties to compete with the two Parties, if that's even possible? A range of reforms such as open primaries, rank choice voting, preventing gerrymandering, electoral reforms, will be examined and discussed. What is the way forward?

Financial Support for this effort.

The printed letters will cost almost \$1,000 to print and mail, and even though I eventually will distribute them online, I would like some contributions (\$5 or \$10 is great; any amount is welcome) as a sign I am

not alone and that you have skin in this game. All your contributions will go into a segregated political account, governed by Michigan election law regulations, monitored by the Berrien County Clerk, with no personal use. Please mail contributions (made out to "William Hurst") to:

William Hurst
Center-Right Campaign Committee
PO Box 134
Baroda, Michigan 49101

To conclude, the Baroda Treasurer's job is not a partisan position, but I was forced to declare a party. I decided to share my urgent concerns about our crisis of democracy in hopes of collaborating with those of you who share my concerns. In addition, I would like to convince you to support a "no-labels" centrist, less ideological, approach to issues. Those of you who are centrist by nature will now know you have company in seeking a pragmatic, less ideological approach to our politics.

It will be tough for some of you to listen to points of view you are not used to hearing; but know that a dialog is possible. Let's have that dialog.

Sincerely,

William Hurst, SupportTheCenter.org

P.S. As my political party or my views have nothing to do with the Baroda Treasurer's job (I was forced to declare my party allegiance to be on the ballot), I will not mention or answer queries about these letters while on the job, and will strenuously object (as I have done in the past) to national politics being brought up in counsel meetings unless directly relevant (which is rare) to a Township issue.