

OPINION
THE EDITORIAL BOARD

The Only Patriotic Choice for President

By The Editorial Board

The editorial board is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

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It is hard to imagine a candidate more unworthy to serve as president of the United States than Donald Trump. He has proved himself morally unfit for an office that asks its occupant to put the good of the nation above self-interest. He has proved himself temperamentally unfit for a role that requires the very qualities — wisdom, honesty, empathy, courage, restraint, humility, discipline — that he most lacks.

Those disqualifying characteristics are compounded by everything else that limits his ability to fulfill the duties of the president: his many criminal charges, his advancing age, his fundamental lack of interest in policy and his increasingly bizarre cast of associates.

This unequivocal, dispiriting truth — Donald Trump is not fit to be president — should be enough for any voter who cares about the health of our country and the stability of our democracy to deny him re-election.

For this reason, regardless of any political disagreements voters might have with her, Kamala Harris is the only patriotic choice for president.

Most presidential elections are, at their core, about two different visions of America that emerge from competing policies and principles. This one is about something more foundational. It is about whether we invite into the highest office in the land a man who has revealed, unmistakably, that he will degrade the values, defy the norms and dismantle the institutions that have made our country strong.

As a dedicated public servant who has demonstrated care, competence and an unwavering commitment to the Constitution, Ms. Harris stands alone in this race. She may not be the perfect candidate for every voter, especially those who are frustrated and angry about our government's failures to fix what's broken — from our immigration system to public schools to housing costs to gun violence. Yet we urge Americans to contrast Ms. Harris's record with her opponent's.

Ms. Harris is more than a necessary alternative. There is also an optimistic case for elevating her, one that is rooted in her policies and borne out by her experience as vice president, a senator and a state attorney general.

Over the past 10 weeks, Ms. Harris has offered a shared future for all citizens, beyond hate and division. She has begun to describe a set of thoughtful plans to help American families.

While character is enormously important — in this election, pre-eminently so — policies matter. Many Americans remain deeply concerned about their prospects and their children's in an unstable and unforgiving world. For them, Ms. Harris is clearly the better choice. She has committed to using the power of her office to help Americans better afford the things they need, to make it easier to own a home, to support small businesses and to help workers. Mr. Trump's economic priorities are more tax cuts, which would benefit mostly the wealthy, and more tariffs, which will make prices even more unmanageable for the poor and middle class.

Beyond the economy, Ms. Harris promises to continue working to expand access to health care and reduce its cost. She has a long record of fighting to protect women's health and reproductive freedom. Mr. Trump spent years trying to dismantle the Affordable Care Act and boasts of picking the Supreme Court justices who ended the constitutional right to an abortion.

Globally, Ms. Harris would work to maintain and strengthen the alliances with like-minded nations that have long advanced American interests abroad and maintained the nation's security. Mr. Trump — who has long praised autocrats like Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban and Kim Jong-un — has threatened to blow those democratic alliances apart. Ms. Harris recognizes the need for global solutions to the global problem of climate change and would continue President Biden's major investments in the industries and technologies necessary to achieve that goal. Mr. Trump rejects the accepted science, and his contempt for low-carbon energy solutions is matched only by his trollish fealty to fossil fuels.

As for immigration, a huge and largely unsolved issue, the former president continues to demonize and dehumanize immigrants, while Ms. Harris at least offers hope for a compromise, long denied by Congress, to secure the borders and return the nation to a sane immigration system.

Many voters have said they want more details about the vice president's plans, as well as more unscripted encounters in which she explains her vision and policies. They are right to ask. Given the stakes of this election, Ms. Harris may think that she is running a campaign designed to minimize the risks of an unforced error — answering journalists' questions and offering greater policy detail could court controversy, after all — under the belief that being the only viable alternative to Mr. Trump may be enough to bring her to victory. That strategy may ultimately prove winning, but it's a disservice to the American people and to her own record. And leaving the public with a sense that she is being shielded from tough questions, as Mr. Biden has been, could backfire by undermining her core argument that a capable new generation stands ready to take the reins of power.

Ms. Harris is not wrong, however, on the clear dangers of returning Mr. Trump to office. He has promised to be a different kind of president this time, one who is unrestrained by checks on power built into the American political system. His pledge to be “a dictator” on “Day 1” might have indeed been a joke — but his undisguised fondness for dictatorships and the strongmen who run them is anything but.

Most notably, he systematically undermined public confidence in the result of the 2020 election and then attempted to overturn it — an effort that culminated in an insurrection at the Capitol to obstruct the peaceful transfer of power and resulted in him and some of his most prominent supporters being charged with crimes. He has not committed to honoring the result of this election and continues to insist, as he did at the debate with Ms. Harris on Sept. 10, that he won in 2020. He has apparently made a willingness to support his lies a litmus test for those in his orbit, starting with JD Vance, who would be his vice president.

His disdain for the rule of law goes beyond his efforts to obtain power; it is also central to how he plans to use it. Mr. Trump and his supporters have described a 2025 agenda that would give him the power to carry out the most extreme of his promises and threats. He vows, for instance, to turn the federal bureaucracy and even the Justice Department into weapons of his will to hurt his political enemies. In at least 10 instances during his presidency, he did exactly that, pressuring federal agencies and prosecutors to punish people he felt had wronged him, with little or no legal basis for prosecution.

Some of the people Mr. Trump appointed in his last term saved America from his most dangerous impulses. They refused to break laws on his behalf and spoke up when he put his own interests above his country's. As a result, the former president intends, if re-elected, to surround himself with people who are unwilling to defy his demands. Today's version of Mr. Trump — the twice-impeached version that faces a barrage of criminal charges — may prove to be the restrained version.

Unless American voters stand up to him, Mr. Trump will have the power to do profound and lasting harm to our democracy.

That is not simply an opinion of Mr. Trump's character by his critics; it is a judgment of his presidency from those who know it best — the very people he appointed to serve in the most important positions of his White House. It is telling that among those who fear a second Trump presidency are people who worked for him and saw him at close range.

Mike Pence, Mr. Trump's vice president, has repudiated him. No other vice president in modern history has done this. "I believe that anyone who puts themselves over the Constitution should never be president of the United States," Mr. Pence has said. "And anyone who asks someone else to put them over the Constitution should never be president of the United States again."

Mr. Trump's attorney general has raised similar concerns about his fundamental unfitness. And his chief of staff. And his defense secretary. And his national security advisers. And his education secretary. And on and on — a record of denunciation without precedent in the nation's long history.

That's not to say Mr. Trump did not add to the public conversation. In particular, he broke decades of Washington consensus and led both parties to wrestle with the downsides of globalization, unrestrained trade and China's rise. His criminal-justice reform efforts were well placed, his focus on Covid vaccine development paid off, and his decision to use an emergency public health measure to turn away migrants at the border was the right call at the start of the pandemic. Yet even when the former president's overall aim may have had merit, his operational incompetence, his mercurial temperament and his outright recklessness often led to bad outcomes. Mr. Trump's tariffs cost Americans billions of dollars. His attacks on China have ratcheted up military tensions with America's strongest rival and a nuclear superpower. His handling of the Covid crisis contributed to historic declines in confidence in public health, and to the loss of many lives. His overreach on immigration policies, such as his executive order on family separation, was widely denounced as inhumane and often ineffective.

And those were his wins. His tax plan added \$2 trillion to the national debt; his promised extension of them would add \$5.8 trillion over the next decade. His withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal destabilized the Middle East. His support for antidemocratic strongmen like Mr. Putin emboldened human rights abusers all over the world. He instigated the longest government shutdown ever. His sympathetic comments toward the Proud Boys expanded the influence of domestic right-wing extremist groups.

In the years since he left office, Mr. Trump was convicted on felony charges of falsifying business records, was found liable in civil court for sexual abuse and faces two, possibly three, other criminal cases. He has continued to stoke chaos and encourage violence and lawlessness whenever it suits his political aims, most recently promoting vicious lies against Haitian immigrants. He recognizes that ordinary people — voters, jurors, journalists, election officials, law enforcement officers and many others who are willing to do their duty as citizens and public servants — have the power to hold him to account, so he has spent the past three and a half years trying to undermine them and sow distrust in anyone or any institution that might stand in his way.

Most dangerous for American democracy, Mr. Trump has transformed the Republican Party — an institution that once prided itself on principle and honored its obligations to the law and the Constitution — into little more than an instrument of his quest to regain power. The Republicans who support Ms. Harris recognize that this election is about something more fundamental than narrow partisan interest. It is about principles that go beyond party.

In 2020 this board made the strongest case it could against the re-election of Mr. Trump. Four years later, many Americans have put his excesses out of their minds. We urge them and those who may look back at that period with nostalgia or feel that their lives are not much better now than they were three years ago to recognize that his first term was a warning and that a second Trump term would be much more damaging and divisive than the first.

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