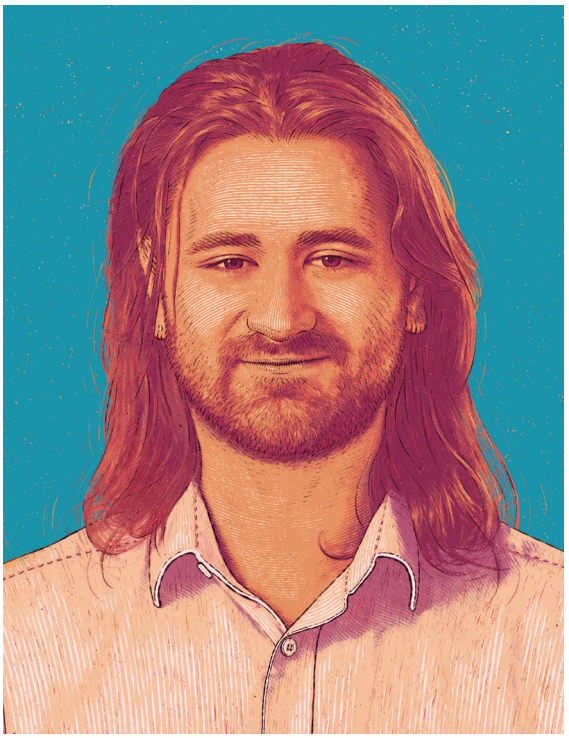


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Last Word: Cato's 300-Year-Old Guide to Election Season

By Paul Meany

Every election season brings grand promises, empty slogans, endless attack ads, and a stream of interchangeable candidates insisting that they alone can be trusted with political power. How can we navigate all this partisan rancor?

Fortunately, *Cato's Letters*—the early 18th-century collection of essays by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon that inspired the Cato Institute's name—has an answer. On the eve of Britain's 1722 general election, the authors offered advice to voters that remains strikingly relevant three centuries later, both during campaigns and after the winners take office.

The important question is not how a candidate behaves while asking for power, but how that person is likely to behave once the need for your vote passes: "These humble creatures, who now bow down before you, will soon look down upon you."

Flattery may be useful on the campaign trail, but once the votes are cast, elected officials start to behave in ways to secure their party's loyalty, increase their reelection chances, and preserve their power. From this perspective, Trenchard and Gordon anticipated what economists would later call public choice theory—the idea that politicians act based on their own self-interest and respond to the same incentives that shape everyone else. "Nor can there be any security in the fidelity of one, who can find it more his interest to betray you, than to serve you faithfully," warned Gordon. Both Trenchard and Gordon were radical Whigs who had no love for the Tories, but they understood that party labels distracted voters from the more important question: whether a particular candidate would preserve or endanger liberty.

Blind loyalty to political parties is harmful because it encourages us to excuse conduct from our preferred side that we would

condemn from our opponents. Partisanship serves as camouflage for the abuse of power, which ultimately receives less scrutiny when exercised by familiar hands. If an expansion of power is dangerous in one faction's hands, it does not become safe in another's. Ambition is not partisan; the desire for power is a permanent feature of human nature. Trenchard and Gordon wrote: "Forget therefore, Gentlemen, the foolish and knavish distinction of High Church and Low Church, Whig and Tory."

If party affiliation is not a reliable guide, what should voters actually look for in a candidate? Trenchard and Gordon condemned bigots, cowards, and those financially dependent on others, warning that such politicians "must work for their masters against you, who ought to be so." Most of all, they urged voters to reject "timorous, fearful, and dastardly spirits; men, who having good principles, either dare not own them, or dare not act according to them."

This does not mean voters must ponder a candidate's inner soul, but simply that they should look for observable evidence.

Trenchard and Gordon were guided by what American Founder Patrick Henry later called the "lamp of experience." The best indicator of future political conduct, Henry noted, is past behavior:

> "Let us not therefore, my countrymen, desert or deceive ourselves, or think we can be safe, if ever such men can get into power. Let us not again be deluded with false promises and deceitful assurances; but let us judge what men will do by what they have done."

If politicians must be judged so cautiously, voters cannot afford to be passive or deferential.

Trenchard and Gordon's advice is therefore to remain vigilant: Ignore flattering promises, distrust partisan excuses, judge candidates by their records and interests, and remember that those seeking power are always tempted to expand it. They exhorted their readers: "It depends upon yourselves alone to make these rights of yours, these noble privileges, of use to you." ✦

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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