

Interview of Steve Cron, President of the Pacific Palisades Democratic Club (PPDC)

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On Tuesday, November 8, Americans are voting for the Midterms. This complex ballot - which has actually already started as people can vote early by mail - is taking place in a context of high tensions between Democrats and Republicans, and, more generally, within American society.

This interview with the President of a Californian democratic club allows to better understand the American voting system (which is fundamentally different from the French one), what the democratic party does locally, and what offices and referendums Californian citizens are voting for.

1. How is the PPDC organized and what does it do?

There are clubs like ours all across the country. In Pacific Palisades, our club has approximately 700 members, which is a sizable group. Anyone who recognizes themselves in the values of the Democrats and pays their 25-dollar annual membership fee can join the club. Our board of 32 members meets every month, and the entire club every year in February. That is when we vote on who will be on the board, our by-laws or important issues on which the board wants input from the entire club membership. We also receive our local elected officials (local congressmen and congresswomen, city council, mayor) who come to speak to the club about what is happening in their position. During its monthly meeting, the board examines one by one the recommendations made by our committee in charge of vetting the candidates and carrying out research on the propositions. A proposition needs to be agreed on by 60% of the board for the club to officially endorse it. 80% of the time, the board follows the recommendations of the research committee. Sometimes, there is no consensus within the board, and that explains why there is no recommendation.

2. Why would the club - or citizens - vote NO on propositions like Proposition 27 (*Legalize Sports Betting and Revenue for Homelessness Prevention Fund Initiative*) or 29 (*Dialysis Clinic Requirements Initiative*) which sound like they could be in keeping with the values of the Democratic Party, or, could more generally serve the general interest?

Propositions are texts which potentially become new laws, without going through the State legislature. They can result from citizens gathering to pass a specific law on their own in order to protect their interests because the legislature can't or won't do it. Sometimes it is more cynical than that. Big companies often want to get more money or stop having to do something for the common good because it is too expensive. They might not want their names associated with a proposition, so they will organize groups to support positions they favor. Then they often name the proposition so that it sounds like it is going to be helpful to the public, when the opposite is true. For proposition 27 for instance, the consensus within our club was that it was going to make a lot of money for the big gambling interests, and very little for homelessness. We thought that the homeless issue was kind a ruse. Our board thought that it is made out to sound like it is for homelessness but it really is just big money for corporations. Proposition 29 would require for a doctor to be on present during dialysis, even if there is no history showing that people have been injured in their absence during such procedures with only technicians presents. Ultimately, this could result in centers closing. Our board

felt that it is something that would only benefit the medical profession, not the patients and so that it was not worth supporting. Overall, the naming of the propositions is often confusing as there is no bill or overseer checking the titles of the bills and so it's deceiving. 20 years ago, Occidental Oil thus wanted to put a big oil well right opposite the beach and they called it the "*Clean Energy Bill*". But people argued that it would do the opposite and pollute the water. As a result, local citizens got together to encourage to vote NO on the proposition, but we can all agree to say that from an exterior perspective it is surprising to encourage to vote NO on a "*Clean Energy Bill*".

That is one of the most important things we do as a club. We try to really dig deep to figure out: is this really going to do what they say it is, or is it not? We look at the common sense reading of it and we look at what other organizations/newspapers/ clubs have said, but we do our own thorough evaluation. We feel like we are looking behind the headlines to figure out what is happening.

3. In France, there are groups and citizens asking for more referenda. From your point of view, what are the pros and cons of these votes, for democracy?

The undeniable pros are that in a perfect world, you are giving the little man and woman an opportunity to get a law passed that might help them, which politicians could not agree on for whatever reason. Maybe the people come together in a perfect democracy and say "this is what we need". They put it on the ballot, they lobby and they get it done. That is the pro. The con part, is that you get special interests which get that they can make more money or lower their responsibilities. For example, the law might say that corporations can't pollute the water near their factories, but these companies might decide that such procedures are too costly, so they decide to put a proposition on the ballot, and call it "*The Clean Water Act*". It has got a catchy name, even though the goal is to pollute the water, but companies with millions or billions of assets will campaign vigorously with fake advertising, so that voters will think the proposition will help clean the water, when the opposite is true.

4. Can you please remind our readers who / for what offices citizens are voting this month here in LA and California?

This year, we are not voting for the President or the Vice-President. In California, we are voting for State Representatives and Senators, for the Governor (governors are usually elected for four-year terms, but not every state votes each time), for our Representatives in Congress and one of our two Senators in Washington. Besides that, the inhabitants of Los Angeles will also vote for county offices (supervisors, sheriff, judges, assessors) and city offices (Mayor, City Council, controller, attorney, members of the LA public college board). As a result, a ballot paper is 6 or 8 pages long, with boxes to check. Now, citizens can vote early in official voting centers, by mail during the 29 days preceding the election, and in person on election day. A ballot will be counted even if the voter doesn't check boxes for every issue on the ballot. So, if someone doesn't have a position on a certain issue or candidate, they can still vote for all of the other issues about which they have opinions. Voting for so many issues at once can be confusing for the citizens so one may wonder whether it really helps local democracy in the end.

5. California is concerned by droughts and Los Angeles by homelessness. Are these local issues going to influence how people vote according to you, if that influences them at all?

If you consider, like me, that droughts (like floods in the East, or tornadoes in the Midwest) are part of the larger problem that is climate change, then I don't think that this topic will be a deciding factor for voters, who have often already formed an opinion on the issue. If you're a Trumpist, this is

certainly not going to be a factor encouraging you to vote *for* someone who pledges to fight the problem. Democrats are going to be looking for candidates concerned by these issues, but most Republicans will say “I will not vote for that because it is going to cost more”, and so that is less money in their pocket. It only influences the elections to the extent that people say “it is, not real” or “it is not so bad so that I should have to pay more”.

As far as homelessness goes, it is a huge issue which divides communities, parties even. Here in LA, the problem has always been rife because of the warmer weather which encourages homeless people to come here from other cities like New York or Chicago, and also because the city is known to be more tolerant than others. But it divides opinions, as we do not always agree on how to try and fix the problem, so, again, it might not be a deciding factor between two candidates. For example, in the race for CD11, both candidates say they want to do something: one says “we’re not going to let people camp near schools and libraries”, the other says “we need to find and pay for housing solutions”. The solutions are very different. Even in our democratic club, we could not reach a consensus on who to recommend for the CD11 race. As President, I was relieved that we did not endorse anybody. If we had said we support candidate 1 or 2, then we would have lost some members.

5. Why has the club decided to endorse Karen Bass for mayor rather than Rick Caruso, who is also running as a Democrat.?

I can’t speak for everybody of course, but I think she has had a long career in government. She was in the state legislature, she was the first woman to be Speaker in the California Assembly, she has been in Congress for a year, she has helped to pass several pieces of legislation which are in keeping with the goals of the Democratic Party. We see her as someone we know and trust. And Caruso, nobody said he is a bad guy, but we don’t know what he is going to do, and he is supported by a lot of money so we’re concerned that ultimately it might matter to him more than the people.

6. Let’s talk about national politics. What would be the impact of a Republican majority in the House of Representatives?

A number of things. The January 6th committee would end immediately. My guess is that the Republican leadership would probably start an impeachment process against Biden for whatever reasons they can find (blaming inflation, as if the USA were the only country in the world with inflation). They will try and cut back on environmental issues. Biden’s large infrastructure bill would be threatened, but then the President can still veto them. It’s hard to imagine that Republicans could pass much with Biden’s veto, but the opposite is also true, he would not be able to get much done, they’d stop him. If the Republicans also had a majority in the Senate and there was an opening at the Supreme Court, Biden would not be able to appoint anybody. Republican senators would stonewall, they would delay the process as much as they can, hoping for a Republican president.

7. Are you personally hopeful or worried for the future of the American democracy?

I am worried for a lot of reasons.

Prior to two years ago, we had never had an election that was challenged. They were challenged in court, which is fair, and people went along with the decision, for example Al Gore in the 2000 Presidential Election. He was probably cheated, but even then, he conceded graciously, and so did Hillary Clinton in 2016 despite her close to 3 million extra votes in the Popular Vote, because she understood and respected the voting rules. Trump challenged the election in dozens of courts, and did not win a single case. What he has done is lead to the January 6th uprising and, overall, profoundly undermining democracy. There are people who are loyal to him who still believe that the election was fraudulent, and this has diminished the faith of some people in the strength of our democracy. Some

election deniers running for State Secretaries in some states. If elected, they could overrule the decision of some judges when it comes to the validity of the votes and modify the results of future elections. So, the prospect of the Republicans back in power is worrying.

The upside is Trump and other Republicans have endorsed a string of right-wing crazies over the years, and invited them in government, and I'm still optimistic at this point that Americans will think they should vote for other, more reasonable people. But if the US elects a Republican Congress, then it will send the signal that Trump has good chances for 2024 and I find it really frightening that after 200 some years that our democracy could be taken over by some right-wing fanatics.