

# THEWEEK

## Welcome to the vengeance election

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The fastest-selling item in the online campaign shop of Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) is a mug emblazoned, "billionaire tears."

"Savor a warm, slightly salty beverage of your choice in this union-made mug as you contemplate all the good a wealth tax could do," the product description suggests, listing off "universal childcare, student debt cancellation, universal free college, and more" as the benefits of Warren's plan to raise taxes on the uber-rich.

But c'mon, a pure-hearted devotion to doing good isn't why this mug is selling so well. It's selling because of the other half of the description, which recounts the time billionaire Leon Cooperman "was brought to tears on live television while discussing the prospect that a President Elizabeth Warren might require him to pay his fair share in taxes." It's selling because in this political moment, as Cato Institute scholar Walter Olson remarked, "the way to rally a mass following is to promise to hurt and humiliate the people they hate." Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the voter, and the ballot box will be the instrument of my wrath.

Warren is capitalizing on her voters' political sadism, but she did not create their appetite, nor is she the only candidate whose supporters are thus moved by antipathy and hungry for vengeance. The specific political moment Olson identified is the "Age of Trump," but it's bigger than President Trump, too. Fully four in 10 members of both major parties said in study results from earlier this year that members of the other party are "downright evil;" nearly one in five think they "lack the traits to be considered fully human;" and about the same proportion will say we'd "be better off as a country if large numbers of the opposing party in the public today just died."

Even the mug joke isn't original: "Liberal tears" stuff was popular among Trump's supporters long before the Warren campaign started hawking this mug. The president's campaign doesn't currently offer a "tears" mug of its own, but it does have products that seem calculated to reduce their owner's Democratic niece to sputtering frustration at the Thanksgiving table (e.g. the "Get over it" tee, the Trump-branded plastic straws, the "Woke" MAGA hat). All the gear you need to own the libs!

And this election is significantly about ownage, which is to say it's about vengeance. About taking power from the people you hate and using it against them. Making them cry. Making them

scared or ashamed because they are bad people. Maybe locking them up. The aggravation is the point. The comeuppance is the goal.

Politics is always about power, but it is not *inherently* so malicious. "[W]hile partisan animus began to rise in the 1980s, it has grown dramatically over the past two decades," Stanford University political scientists Shanto Iyengar and Masha Krupenkin wrote in a 2018 study in *Political Psychology*. Support for one's own political tribes is increasingly linked to opposition to outsiders, they found, so much so that "hostility toward the opposing party has eclipsed positive affect for one's own party as a motive for political participation" — which is to say Americans are more likely to vote against the other party than for their own. Out with, "When they go low, we go high;" in with, "When they go low, we kick them."

This negative partisanship means much of the 2020 election is focused on the perceived evil we want to punish or the allegedly deserved pain we wish to inflict over the good we hope to accomplish: Universal childcare, student debt cancellation, and universal free college are great or whatever, but what's really fantastic about a wealth tax is the chance to stick it to those selfish moneybags. Or among Trump's crowd: Lower taxes, less regulation, sure, but let's talk mass deportation, an alligator-filled border moat, or shooting migrants in the legs.

Certainly, there's a difference between wanting to make someone feel bad by confiscating some of their enormous wealth ("billionaire tears") and wanting to force them out of their home and away from their family ("Send her back!"). There's also a difference between a plausible policy goal like the wealth tax and a fantastical musing like the alligator moat. Yet the disparity here is one of degree, not type. Both sides seek to use power as a cudgel against political opponents. Antagonism is the priority.

Vengeance politics doesn't necessarily produce different policies, though it does devalue policy accomplishments in favor of the emotional satisfaction successfully hurting or riling opponents can bring. Yet even when the practical effects are the same, this motivation matters — to the state of our souls if nothing else. Seeking a wealth tax or restrictive immigration rules or any similarly controversial proposal because you sincerely believe it is the right thing to do is ethically debatable. Seeking it in whole or part because you like to see political enemies suffer is not.

Malice is never a virtue, not even when the feeling is mutual.