

OPINION

THE LEDGER INDEPENDENT

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American generosity

Americans are the most generous people on Earth. After charitable giving dipped during the COVID years — when inflation, lockdowns and economic strain made it harder for average families to give — American generosity has rebounded. In 2024, U.S. charitable giving reached \$592.5 billion, climbing past pre-pandemic levels even after adjusting for inflation — encouraging news as another holiday season begins.

I first began exploring the myths and truths of American charity nearly 20 years ago after watching John Stossel's classic 20/20 report, "Are Americans Cheap?"

Stossel showed how deeply generosity is woven into the American character. Even with massive government welfare programs, he reported then, Americans have always stepped up, giving directly to the people who need help the most.

We still do. According to Stossel's recent column in Reason, Americans continue to support charities that get measurable results, such as Student Sponsor Partners, which provides scholarships to low-income students.

Such groups offer the kind of practical, person-to-person charity Americans have favored for generations.

The pattern of giving has changed since COVID. During the pandemic, charitable participation dropped sharply among middle- and lower-income households.

Whereas 73 percent of Americans earning under \$40,000 donated to charity in 2017, that number fell to about 56 percent during the pandemic.

Today, with groceries, rent, insurance and credit card costs far higher than they were just four years ago, many families simply have less room to give — yet Americans of modest means still give a larger share of their income than anyone else.

At the same time, affluent households are giving more than ever. Americans with a household net worth above \$1 million or incomes

above \$200,000 are donating nearly 20 percent more than before the pandemic. Many are using donor-advised funds or appreciated stock to give strategically, which has helped shore up overall giving totals even as participation rates among average households lag behind. In 2024, individuals gave about \$392.5 billion, corporations added \$44.4 billion and foundations contributed \$109.8 billion.

People who attend weekly services are still four times more likely to give than those who do not, though inflation-adjusted religious giving has slipped slightly as fewer people participate in traditional congregations.

Still, no country comes close to American charitable giving. Recent comparisons from the Charities Aid Foundation and Johns Hopkins show the United States giving about \$1,700 per person each year — more than three times the rate of other wealthy nations and up to ten times the levels in France, Germany and Italy.

Why? Because it's who we are.

Nearly 200 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville traveled the United States and marveled at how quickly Americans of every station formed voluntary associations — churches, schools and civic groups — to address needs in their communities.

In "Democracy in America," he explained that this habit of joining together sprang from what he called "self-interest rightly understood" — the recognition that individuals advance their own well-being by actively helping one another rather than depending on a distant central government.

That remains true today for most Americans.

Even though government spending on social programs exceeds \$1 trillion a year, private giving continues to flourish because most Americans still believe local volunteers and private community groups solve problems best.

That's something to celebrate as we kick off the holiday season.

party going to figure out that Trump doesn't care for anybody but himself? When is the Congress going to take back their powers and deny him the right to decide who gets money and who doesn't? When are they going to stand up and say no more to this violent idiot that they now have in house?

HOW YOU SEE IT

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When is the Republican

The Comment Line is 606-564-9091 ext. 1251. A tape recorder is used to record messages. Please speak slowly and clearly and keep background noises low. It is not necessary to leave your name in order to participate in the Comment Line, however we ask that callers not dominate the medium. The Ledger Independent reserves the right to edit comments for libel, obscenities or other inappropriate material.



Giving thanks the Epstein files will be released

When the first woman emerged from the mists of time to point the finger at Bill Cosby, claiming that he had drugged and raped her, I saw the writing on the wall.

We were now going to take seriously accusations of bad behavior made, in many cases, decades after the fact.

This coincided with an ongoing investigation into the Catholic church, which was dealing with its own priest-pedophilia problem, which created a perfect storm of clients for people like Gloria Allred who survive on the tears of alleged victims.

We all know what happened to Cosby. He was convicted of sexual assault after a torturous journey to the courthouse, and then that conviction was overturned because he'd been denied due process.

I wrote many columns about that lack of due process in both the Cosby and the Catholic Church contexts, which earned me a lot of hate mail and the moniker "rape apologist."

It's no surprise, then, that I was a vocal critic of the MeToo movement, which was like Cosby on steroids, resembling more the witch hunts of Salem, Mass., than any legitimate inquiry into wrongdoing.

Christine Blasey Ford waged a dog-and-pony show against now Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh because of repressed "memories" of people laughing at her as the former prep school student sexually assaulted her at a party in Maryland.

I'm sure that there were some actual cases where victims found their voices and decided that silence was no longer an option.

I am sure that there were, in fact, situations where women — and some men — were forced into situations against their will, things that could legally qualify as rape.

But from what I could observe over the years, the vast majority of these cases were brought to dismantle the patriarchy at some macro level, as opposed to seeking real justice for criminal acts.

And far too many of us blinked and said, "OK, I guess we just have to go along or risk being called rape apologists."

But now we have the Epstein files, and the story is completely flipped. We are no longer talking about women who thought they were abused and mistreated by men who might have had some power differential but who were their age, or slightly older.

Here, we are talking about a man, and his diabolically immoral girlfriend who orchestrated the wholesale violation of scores of young girls, barely pubescent and below the age of consent.

This was rape, pure and simple. And unlike many of the MeToo self-described victims, these girls, now women, had been making accusations for decades, trying to get someone to listen to them.

Amazingly enough, even during the MeToo moment, no one really did. There were some cases that might have made it into court, and Epstein was convicted of sex crimes, but he skated with a sentence that reflected just how much knowledge he had of the twisted vices among the rich and powerful.

That includes Republicans and Democrats, Catholics and Jews, men and women, princes and commoners, Americans and foreigners.

Jeffrey Epstein's reach was as wide and as potent as the Medellin drug cartel, and the poison that he administered as lethal.

Donald Trump campaigned on releasing the Epstein files, and endeared himself to the MAGA base with this promise.

Then, once elected, he backtracked for what some consider inexplicable reasons, and others consider self-preservation, and called the whole thing a "Democratic hoax," which was a repellent slap in the face to the victims of the predatory Epstein.

Finally, after the pressure became too great and he realized that his own party was going to vote to release the files, the president switched sides in a move that would have made Wrong Way Marshall — the Vikings player who scooped up an opponent's fumble and ran into the opponent's end zone — extremely proud.

Regardless of the reason, he did the right thing.

These are not women with a desire to wreak vengeance on chauvinist men. These are not the Christine Blasey Fords who have vague memories of rowdy high school parties.

These are not aspiring actresses going to the hotel rooms of powerful Hollywood moguls.

These were girls. These were children. These were 15-year-olds and 16-year-olds, promised jobs and instead trafficked in the most horrific manner.

The crime is apolitical, agnostic, transcends class and philosophy, and should be exposed in all of its gory reality. And frankly, it is time.

Evil people have hidden in the shadows, protected by the idea that their power would keep them in those shadows forever.

It's time to shine the light, so that these victims, real victims, will finally be seen.

And as we approach the Thanksgiving holiday, this is one very important reason to give thanks.

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