

## FINAL WORD ↔ BY TIM ROWLAND

# George Santos Meets Public Choice

**G**eorge Santos (R-Neverland) is, at the time of this writing, still a member of Congress and determined to continue being so. Santos—or perhaps his name is Anthony Devolder; even that’s up for question—won a seat in Congress last fall and almost immediately afterward was discovered to have made up nearly every bit of personal history he campaigned on.

For instance: He said he had degrees from Baruch College and New York University, but neither school has record that he was ever a student. He said he worked for Citigroup and Goldman Sachs, but neither firm has record that he worked there. He claimed to have founded a charity for pets, but no benefactors have been found and the donated money seems to have disappeared. He claimed he was of Jewish ancestry but now says he’s only “Jew-ish.” He said his mother died of an illness related to the 9/11 attack, but she apparently hadn’t been to the United States since 1999. He said ... well, you’ve been reading the papers.

I’d say you can’t make this stuff up, but clearly you can.

The saga has been great fodder for the late-night shows. And it’s tempting to dismiss Santos, er Devolder—*whomever*—as just an extreme joke version of the lying politician.

And that has me thinking about public choice theory.

Public choice says that government officials—whether elected, appointed, or humble bureaucrats—are as self-interested as their private sector counterparts. That doesn’t make them necessarily good or evil, but only as flawed as the rest of us. And in Santos’s case, that would be among the

most flawed of us.

He wanted the gold ring—make that the gold congressional lapel button—and so was willing to say just about anything to win election. Or perhaps winning wasn’t really his thing, but simply the jazz of campaigning and claiming to be someone he wishes he was.

I wonder what he’ll ultimately think about his choices. Yes, he has the Capitol Hill office and new pals like Kevin McCarthy and Marjorie Taylor Greene. But he’s now a national laughingstock, an embarrassment to his political party, and probably three-quarters of the voters in his district want him gone. If that ratio doesn’t change in the next 20 months, his life post-Congress probably won’t be that fun—unless it’s fun to be disgraced professionally and a social pariah. It’s hard to see how that’s in Santos’s self-interest.

In the meantime, several questions nag.

Did he believe he wouldn’t get caught? Did he think he might get caught, but it wouldn’t matter? Did he believe the ends would justify the means in voters’ eyes, and his naughtiness would be excused so long as he votes “correctly?” Did he see his behavior as simply the next logical step in a virtual, fact-free world in which we’re ever more free to concoct an aspirational life that papers over our failures and shortcomings?

Which is not to say that public choice is wrong about Santos, but rather that he miscalculated. Or—not to get too clinical on you—that he ain’t right in the head.

Maybe by the time this is in print he’ll have grown a conscience and resigned. Or, citing the importance of public integrity, his colleagues will give him the boot. Maybe he gets arrested for campaign finance fraud.

Sadly, the most likely outcome is he’ll persist, his party will stonewall, the wheels of justice will grind to a virtual standstill, and after two years the whole mess will either be forgotten or deemed unimportant.

But if he’s re-elected, we need to ask ourselves why we vote for human beings at all. Santos wouldn’t win because of character or seriousness, but simply because enough of his voters believe he votes the “right” way. So why have human representatives at all? Why not just vote for an algorithm that yields the appropriate votes in Congress and let computer programs do the rest? That would take care of the public choice problem. We’d cast our ballots for the MAGA-machine or the Progressive-tron, and then every couple years consider switching to a different algorithm.

We seem to be drifting in this direction anyway. Politics is allowing for fewer and fewer gray areas open to the judgment and pragmatism of human legislators. All gun laws are either good or bad. Abortion is right in all circumstances or wrong in all circumstances. Government spending is always virtuous or always evil. So, why not just hand those binary policy choices over to algorithmic ghosts in the machine?

For now, though, we’re damned to keep voting for their human counterparts. Just don’t be surprised if, in 2024, there’s a clean electoral sweep for the Keebler elves. **R**



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