

## We must preserve our democracy when our politics go awry| Guestview

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Guest columnist

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Nearly everyone considered the first presidential debate a disaster. Interruptions, name-calling and bad faith defined 90 minutes of Americans' lives in a year already characterized by rancor, tragedy, loss and uncertainty. The British Broadcasting Corporation called it a low point for American democracy. The second debate fell into the strange spectacle of parallel candidates meeting voters on separate broadcast networks.

Sensible observers are exhausted by bickering and dissembling. Bitter partisanship supercharges this frustration. Research confirms that partisanship has grown to new proportions. For many, personal identity and ideology fully overlap. A win for "them" is felt as a loss for "us." We often assume the worst of "the other side." Surveys even suggest that some Americans are willing to compromise on democracy if it means retaining power and achieving their policy goals.

Not surprisingly, from riots to shootings, political tension has erupted into violence more than once this year. Even the president has hedged when asked about ensuring a peaceful transfer of power. American politics feels like it is spiraling.

As a citizen and a scholar of politics, though, I see some deeper, shared principles — fixed points that make American democracy possible but must be continually renewed.

Even if few of us are changing our minds, by reaffirming the process itself, restating our shared rights, and talking about our values, we preserve our democracy when our politics go awry. Not unlike believers reaffirming their convictions, this process is vital to forging the shared faith that makes democracy possible.

For instance, if they are responsible, our politicians affirm the democratic process and that they will accept the results.

They disavow violence and embrace the rule of law.

If in office, they at least make a show of not abusing that position for political gain.

On the debate stage, they take their adversaries' views as honestly held even if they find them calamitously wrong.

They talk about voting as a right, one that should be extended and practiced as fully as possible.

Good leaders recognize that some disagreements are indeed irreconcilable and that some views are categorically wrong. Still, they also know that democracy is the process of mediating those disputes.

For skeptics and activists, of course, this process seems riddled with hypocrisy and even a mask for malfeasance and self-dealing. They are not incorrect. Neither are they, in my view, entirely correct. As the great political scientist Samuel Huntington once observed, "Critics say that America is a lie because its reality falls so far short of its ideas. They are wrong. America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is a hope."

U.S. Sen. Mike Lee of Utah recently tweeted that "democracy isn't the objective." I suspect he meant that no person or community can find its fullness in the practice of democracy, but I also suspect he was missing the point.

Democracy is a method of politics. It is designed to channel passions, bestow legitimacy and allow yesterday's winners to possibly lose today's election. This allows accountability and social trust. As a method, it must be sacrosanct.

Democracy may not be the sum of our life as a community or a nation. It is, however, how we live together. An apocryphal story holds that Benjamin Franklin commented that he and others had created "a republic, if you can keep it." Each election season, we keep that republic through our democratic processes.

Elections are exhausting. Few of us will feel refreshed on Nov. 4. Still, like an act of religious pilgrimage or sacrificial service, perhaps we can feel that whatever the outcome, we have renewed our democratic faith. We committed to respecting the process and the rule of law, to respecting our fellow citizens and the process that binds us.

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