

Editorial: Too much of the political right has given up on electoral democracy.

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By the Editorial Board

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On America's birthday, the word "patriotism" gets waved around like a rhetorical flag, but what does it really mean? Some Americans express love of country by paying homage to the nation's military might, others to its traditions of freedom and compassion, still others to the enduring genius of America's founding documents.

It's much easier to define what patriotism isn't. On this Independence Day, Americans of all political stripes should be able to agree that elections must be accessible and fair, that the legitimacy of those elections must be respected regardless of outcome — and that violence is *never* an acceptable response from citizens who don't like a particular election result.

Yet those fundamental principles, which are as good a definition of patriotism as any, are currently being challenged by large swaths of Americans and their political leaders. A majority of Republicans still claim to believe the corrosive lie that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president. One poll indicates close to 4 in 10 Republicans consider violence to be an acceptable tool to address perceived failures by the nation's leaders. Patriots of conscience, regardless of party, should forcefully reject this inherently un-American mindset.

Founders' intentions

For all their faults (particularly on matters of race), America's founders were able to look past the authoritarian systems of monarchy and empire in their time, and envision a form of government in which the people ruled themselves, via their elected representatives. Inherent in that radical idea was the expectation that citizens whose preferred candidates failed to win elections would accept the judgment of the constitutional process. Democracy may well be, as Winston Churchill put it, the worst form of government except for all the others, but it is the only *legitimate* form of government, warts and all.

The warts of America's particular form of democracy were evident when the last two Republican presidents (George W. Bush and Donald Trump) each initially won the office despite having received fewer votes nationally than his opponent. Democrats were especially frustrated that Trump won while losing by almost 3 million ballots in 2016. It has spurred appropriate discussion about reforming the Electoral College, *within the processes laid out in the Constitution*, to better reflect the will of the people.

But no serious American of any party argued that Trump wasn't the legitimate president as chosen by the system currently in place. That restraining respect for the constitutional process could stand as another definition of patriotism.

However, political polarization today is so deep and toxic that many have become convinced that any electoral win by the other side is intrinsically illegitimate and should be opposed by any tactics necessary, including tactics outside the Constitution. Examples of this dangerous (and thoroughly unpatriotic) instinct can no doubt be found on both the left and the right — but only on the right has it become a defining characteristic of the movement, embraced at every level of Republican politics.

Jan. 6 was among the darkest moments in the nation's history, not merely because of a rogue president's unheard-of refusal to accept his electoral defeat, nor his incitement of his followers to assault the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to overturn that defeat. The more lasting danger is the contempt for electoral democracy that the episode has exposed on America's political right.

Undermining democracy

It was exposed by the 147 Republican members of Congress (led by Missouri's own Sen. Josh Hawley) who, having just witnessed firsthand the violence that Trump's big vote-fraud lie had visited upon the seat of government, further promoted that lie, voting to overturn a valid election based on nothing but their supporters' disdain for the outcome. It was exposed in most congressional Republicans' failure to hold Trump accountable for what was arguably the most impeachable thing any sitting president has ever done. It was exposed in the GOP's refusal to allow a full investigation of the insurrection, for fear it would reflect badly on their party.

For months, this contempt for electoral democracy has been exposed in the more than a dozen Republican-controlled state legislatures that have passed laws designed to make voting more difficult for minorities, urban dwellers, the poor and others they fear will vote for Democrats. And it was exposed again last month, when Senate Republicans didn't merely oppose an effort to protect voting rights via federal law but refused to even let that effort be debated on the floor.

Plenty of words come to mind to describe these actions by one of America's two major political parties. "Patriotic" is nowhere among them.

Of course, the purveyors of this poison claim they are themselves acting out of a patriotic urge to protect the sanctity of the vote. This is the biggest lie of all. Countless election officials and dozens of judges of both parties have looked more closely than in any election in modern memory, and have found zero evidence of the widespread voter fraud that Trump

falsely claims robbed him of the presidency. There is, therefore, also no validity to the coordinated voter-suppression campaigns sweeping red-state America, predicated on that phony allegation.

It isn't just public faith in elections being undermined here. In a February poll by the American Enterprise Institute, 39% of Republican respondents agreed that "if elected leaders will not protect America, the people must do it themselves, even if it requires violent actions."

That's not a sentiment that anyone who respects a constitutional system of government would support. On this of all days, Americans should remember there is just one legitimate means of change in a democracy: free and fair elections. Protecting that institution is patriotic. Undermining it isn't — ever.

