**American democracy at risk**

**If democracy isn’t zero-sum, neither is politics, especially in diverse societies**

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There can be no question that American democracy is at risk. Two years ago, thousands of insurrectionists stormed and occupied the Capitol building in a failed attempt to overthrow the 2020 election results. They were supported by the majority of Republican members of Congress who falsely claimed the election outcome was fraudulent. Additional disturbing signs are evident across the country: Angry parents storm school board and city council meetings, demanding that books be banned and teachers be fired. Election officials count votes while armed protesters gather threateningly outside. Republican-led state legislatures pass laws restricting voting rights. Hate crimes and mass shootings continue to rise. Students from both the right and left shout down invited speakers with whom they disagree. Universities feel pressure to fire professors or ban groups that challenge conventional viewpoints. And, as the recent Speaker’s election debacle exhibited, our politics are so polarised by hyper-partisanship that our legislature is now alternately paralysed or dysfunctional.

['India expanding settler-colonial project in IIOJK by grabbing Kashmiris' land'](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Feb-2023/india-expanding-settler-colonial-project-in-iiojk-by-grabbing-kashmiris-land)

Against this dire backdrop, we should debunk that oft-made claim that “free and fair elections are the essence of a democracy.” While important, elections are just one of the characteristics of a democracy, not its essence. More important are the values that must be cultivated and protected to preserve a true democratic order. Central among these is that loser must respect election outcomes, and winners must show respect for the rights of losers. The rights of those whose views diverge from the majority must be protected, and winners and losers, the majority and minority, must engage in constructive dialogue to find compromise solutions to problems facing society as a whole. This is the essence of democracy.

A true democracy is never a zero-sum game where winners use their positions of power to silence, cancel, or demonstrate intolerance for the views of those they’ve defeated in free and fair elections. The authoritarian impulse to squash or punish those who represent divergent viewpoints is anti-democratic. Maintaining vigilance in cultivating such a democratic culture is important because without it a democracy can wither and die.

[President felicitates Iran on 44th anniversary of Revolution](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Feb-2023/piaf-rejects-hike-in-power-gas-tariffs-fears-increased-energy-rates-to-damage-economy)

Respecting minority rights and views is important in a society with one clearly dominant group, and even more critical in evenly divided societies. Many Egyptians recoiled from rule by the Muslim Brotherhood because of their heavy-handed abuse of electoral victory. The behaviour of the victorious far-right coalition currently governing in Israel, unravelling the courts, rule of law, and minority rights, has caused fear and a backlash among many Israelis. If democracy isn’t zero-sum, neither is politics, especially in diverse societies. When victors overreach by imposing their ideologies or attempting to extend their power by changing the rules of the road, they weaken democracy and invite backlash from groups threatened by their behaviour.

Today the US provides a case in point. In 2022, Republicans won a very close election and now hold a slight advantage in the House of Representatives, while losing ground in the Senate. Democrats still control the White House. Given this outcome, one would think that Republicans and Democrats, evenly divided among the electorate, would seek compromise solutions to pressing problems facing the country—with Republicans in the House using their leverage to push for compromises reflecting their views.

[Folk singer Bashir Baloch passes away in Quetta](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Feb-2023/folk-singer-bashir-baloch-passes-away-in-quetta)

Instead, Republicans have decided to use their control of the House to paralyse the government and demonise opponents, making all-or-nothing demands. Such an approach is not only fatal to respectful discourse and compromise but also poisons political relationships, creating an even more polarised electorate.

“Politics is the art of the possible,” but we must also acknowledge the vital role played in a democracy by groups that passionately advocate principled positions or forward-looking solutions. Our political history is filled with examples of groups and visionary leaders who have organised around their principles and solutions, moving public attitudes and changing the political calculations of policymakers, thereby expanding what is possible.

But when political views become dogmatic—hardened, absolute, and unbending—this can be counterproductive and self-destructive. In such instances, the bad behaviour of uncompromising extremists is held up as “principled,” while moderate voices seeking solutions are denounced as “sellouts.” Compromise becomes impossible, and democracy suffers. This, sadly, is where we are today in America. And it is putting our very democracy at risk.

[PPP to participate in bye-elections after intra-party consultation: Kaira](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Feb-2023/ppp-to-participate-in-bye-elections-after-intra-party-consultation-kaira)

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