**Saviors of US Democracy**

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Long before the US presidential elections on November 3, 2020, reporters asked President Donald Trump whether he would accept the election results if they went against him. He declined to give a clear response, but implied that if he lost it would only be on account of fraud and rigging of results. This year, voting had some usual features. Because of the raging pandemic, many people did not vote in person and chose instead to do so by mail. The election, however, drew a record turnout of voters and a total of 160 million participated in the electoral process, a slight majority voting in person than by mail.

After the polls closed on election night, the media showed early results based on votes cast in person.

Trump and his invited guests ensconced in the White House were eagerly watching the results on a giant TV screen. They indicated Trump comfortably ahead of Joe Biden in some crucial states. He and his friends were thrilled. However, the exultation did not last long; as the mail voting results started to come in, they showed Trump falling behind Biden. The counting and tabulation of all the results took time, but when completed, they showed Biden had decisively defeated Trump, capturing more than seven million more votes than Trump. More importantly, out of 538 total electoral college votes, Biden secured 306, far exceeding the 270 electoral threshold needed to win, as compared to 232 that went to Trump.

Most surprising were the results from two states, Georgia and Arizona, that normally vote Republican. This time both voted for Biden, a Democrat, as did several other so-called battle ground states, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Illinois, that usually determine the fate of the elections. African Americans turned out in large numbers, voting heavily for Biden, and that seems to have decided the election for him.

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Then, we witnessed a strange spectacle unfolding, unknown in the annals of two-centuries of US democracy. Even before the vote-counting had been completed, Trump angrily charged that the elections had been stolen and he had been the victim of fraud and cheating, without offering any evidence to support his allegations. Those in his administration who dared to disagree with him or did not support him suffered the consequences. Chris Krebs, the department of Homeland Security official responsible for ensuring the integrity of the election, was unceremoniously fired, because he rejected Trump&#39;s claims of widespread fraud, asserting that it was one of the cleanest elections in our history.

Following the electoral defeat, Trump and his aides looked for weaknesses in the system which they could exploit to undo the election results. Trump exercises absolute power over his supporters, much like a religious leader, and they implicitly believed his contention that he was the real winner, not Biden. On his urging, his followers started harassing state assembly members and election officials pressuring them to not verify the validity of the results, a legal requirement. In several states, votes have been recounted several times for any errors or discrepancies, but the results have not changed. The president also unsuccessfully tried to persuade the Governor of the state of Georgia and speaker of the Pennsylvania House of Representative to manipulate the elections results in his favor. Neither complied.

Trump’s election campaign hired a battery of lawyers, headed by the feisty former mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, that swamped courts in several states with numerous legal challenges to the election results, all based on flimsy or frivolous evidence. Over 50 lawsuits designed to overturn the elections results have already been thrown out by judges, who often used stern language expressing their opprobrium. Finally, the Republican attorney general of the state of Texas, joined by and attorney generals of seventeen Republican states filed a lawsuit in the Supreme Court to overturn the votes of four states, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Georgia, essentially awarding a second term to Trump. Disgracefully, many Republican Congressmen also signed up in support the lawsuit. The Supreme Court swiftly dismissed the case, giving it no hearing and contending that the Texas attorney general had no jurisdiction to petition about other states. It appears at this time that the last desperate attempts to nullify the election results have been doomed. On December 14, the Electoral College will meet to vote and formally ratify Biden’s victory.

Although it appears almost certain that Joe Biden will be sworn in on January 20 as the next US president, the unprecedented raucous attempts to delegitimize his presidency may have a lasting effect of undermining the American representative democracy. In a recent article in the Washington Post, the highly respected Indian American journalist and author, Farid Zakaria, cautioned that the nation had come perilously close to witnessing the toppling of the two-centuries old democratic system. The country is polarized as never before, except prior to the civil war period one-and-half centuries ago. Zakaria believes that the foundations of democracy have proven resilient in face of this onslaught only because of the honorable conduct of state officials and the principled and upright judges and jurists at state and federal level who did not buckle under intense threats and pressure. Also crucial was the traditional non-involvement of the army in domestic politics despite the president’s attempt to undermine this tradition James Madison, the fourth president, who helped frame the US constitution in 1787 is supposed to have included some inbuilt check and balances to protect the nation from an autocratic president, but we witnessed that these measures did not work as intended. Tim Wu, professor of law at Columbia University in a recent op-ed in the New York Times, quoted Madison: “There is a degree of depravity in mankind, but also qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence.” Thus, in the end, it was the integrity and sense of honor of a few human operatives that proved much more compelling than protections provided in the constitution in saving the democratic norms.

Importantly, the current imbroglio has spotlighted some inherent vulnerabilities in the US electoral process, rooted in the two-centuries-old constitution, which can be exploited by an unscrupulous adventurer equipped with the vast powers of the presidency, and commanding a cult-like following. The frightening possibility highlights the urgent need for reforms in the, structure, organization and conduct of national  
elections.

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