

Opinion | An Election Doesn't Have to Tear Us Apart

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The Wall Street Journal, November 3, 2020

As this piece goes to press, Americans across the country are still voting. I don't know who will win the election, and there's a significant chance you don't either, even if you're reading this on Wednesday. But the most important question isn't who wins; it is whether the outcome strengthens—or further undermines—trust in governing institutions.

Can Americans come together across divisions to affirm some simple truths? Every legitimate vote should be counted, and the results of the count—whenever it is completed—should be respected.

That a ballot has been cast doesn't always mean that it should be counted. Some mail-in ballots will fail to conform to the relevant state procedures. Others will arrive after the deadlines established by legislatures and courts. Contesting these ballots is legitimate, and mechanisms are in place to resolve most of these disputes.

That said, there is no legal basis for challenging an entire category of legitimate ballots counted after election night. President Trump's repeated statements that the results in the early hours of Wednesday morning should determine the outcome of the contest are wrong and dangerous. Whatever Mr. Trump intends, his remarks undermine his supporters' willingness to accept the results of a contest that may not be settled until days after the polls close.

Unless Joe Biden wins some of the hotly contested Southern and Southwestern states that Mr. Trump carried in 2016 (North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Texas and Arizona), the race will come down to the Blue Wall—Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin—where Mr. Trump in 2016 pulled off surprising victories by narrow margins.

Along with nearly every other state in the country, all three Blue Wall states have received record numbers of mail-in ballots. Unlike most other states, however, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin don't allow the processing of mail-in ballots until Election Day, and Michigan doesn't begin until the day before. With millions of envelopes to

open, signatures to verify, and ballots to prepare for tabulation, these states will be hard pressed to finish counting by Friday.

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If the election is close in these three states, the lead could easily change hands between election night and the final count. Surveys indicate that the majority of President Trump's supporters planned to vote in person on Nov. 3, while the majority of Mr. Biden's were mailing in their ballots. Any effort to stop the count and freeze the results as of election night would leave millions of legal and legitimate ballots uncounted, subverting the will of the people.

One hopes that Mr. Trump won't turn his words into action. But if he does, the nation would be in crisis—unless the individuals and institutions who can shape public perceptions act responsibly.

Part of this will require rethinking television coverage. Networks compete to call races early, but there is reason to wait, and this year is an example. A pandemic shifted tens of millions of voters away from in-person voting toward mail-in ballots. The networks can help make Americans more comfortable with the fact that the outcome in many states may not be known for some days.

The print press has a role to play as well. A coalition of newspapers, including those who endorsed President Trump for re-election and those who supported Mr. Biden, should unite to back the legally established electoral process.

The 2016 election reminded Americans that the outcome of presidential contests is determined by the Electoral College and not by a popular vote. In this election, Americans have learned that each state controls how its election processes. Starting the day after the election, the bipartisan National Governors Association should defend the legitimacy of the process, however long it takes to count the ballots.

If the election result isn't known on Wednesday, the most important person in the country won't be either President Trump or Mr. Biden, but Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. As the senior Republican in the legislative branch, the course he pursues will influence his colleagues and rank-and-file Republicans.

If Mr. Trump persists in rejecting the legitimacy of votes counted after election night, what will Sen. McConnell do? Will he defend the rule of law, or will he back the president's effort to maintain power by nullifying the valid votes of millions of

Americans? If he acts as the patriot I believe him to be, he will do the right thing. If he doesn't, he will be remembered as the man who intensified a crisis he could have ended.