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Divisive campaigning damages democracy

In the final days before the US election, political leaders must speak out to boost confidence in the democratic process, says **Andrew Daniller**.

Whatever the result of the US election, one outcome seems certain: record numbers of people will consider it unfair. Although Donald Trump's allegations that the process is rigged are unfounded, analysis of previous elections shows that there is likely to be a swell of voter dissatisfaction with how it was run. This loss of trust in democracy could have important implications for policy-making, at both a national and a local level, and it must be addressed.

Peaceful transfer of power depends on the acquiescence of losing candidates and parties, and on the belief of their supporters that the electoral process was fundamentally fair. Yet supporters of losing candidates and parties consistently have less trust in the integrity of the process following an election. This is true even in democracies with long histories of free and fair elections.

This gap becomes troubling when distrust is amplified so that large numbers of citizens openly question whether the winners can govern legitimately. In this light, several features of the current US election campaign are concerning.

First, both presidential candidates are reasonably well-liked by their core supporters, but seemingly despised by supporters of the other candidate, to an extent not seen in a generation.

My own research shows that voters with the largest discrepancies in their affective evaluations of the two candidates, which I refer to as emotional investment in the election, experienced the largest changes in perceptions of electoral integrity following the 2012 presidential election. Among supporters of a losing candidate, the stronger their affective preference for the candidate, the greater are their doubts about the fairness of the process. Regardless of the outcome in 2016, the supporters of the loser are all but guaranteed to have a historically extreme dislike for the winner. Unfortunately, we should expect confidence in the election result to suffer accordingly.

Second, when a single party wins across multiple consecutive election cycles — for example, during the United Kingdom's extended period of Conservative rule throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s — supporters of the losing parties tend to become less and less satisfied with democracy with each additional loss.

If Hillary Clinton gives Democrats their third victory in a row in 2016, will Republicans become more convinced that the process is unfair? This is one implication of an analysis of data from 2008 and 2012 election panels that I conducted with my dissertation adviser, Diana Mutz.

Since Republican Dwight Eisenhower succeeded Democrat Harry Truman in 1953, a single party has held the White House for three consecutive terms only once: when Republican George H. W. Bush followed Ronald Reagan into office more than 20 years ago. Today, US voters have little to no experience of the other party controlling

the presidency for more than two terms in a row.

Another cause for concern in the 2016 election comes directly from the Republican nominee himself. Trump has gone so far as to claim that the election might be “stolen” from him. If he loses, will his supporters follow his lead and question the legitimacy of the process? They will have an even more difficult time accepting that their fellow citizens chose the other option if their candidate continues to maintain that the results were fraudulent.

If trust in US democracy falls, it could severely constrain the policy options available to elected officials. When citizens don't trust their government in the abstract, they won't support governmental efforts, in areas ranging from alleviating racial inequality to combating international terrorism.

Furthermore, a lack of trust may encourage citizens to support candidates who promise fundamental disruptions to the system — sometimes at the expense of key democratic principles, including the freedom of the press and independence of the courts. Although the root causes of Trump's rise to political prominence will be studied for years, early public-opinion data suggest a link between support for him in the Republican primaries and low levels of political trust. At the most extreme, distrust of the electoral process may produce disruptive forms of protest or even violence. Already, city officials in Philadelphia are worried that Trump's calls for his supporters in other parts of Pennsylvania to monitor the city's polling places could lead to voter intimidation or worse on election day.

Little can be done about the gulf between Republicans' and Democrats' attitudes towards two very well-known candidates at this point in the process. Similarly, partisans are unlikely to vote for the other candidate simply in the name of the regular alternation of power, and it would be unreasonable to demand otherwise given the variety of important policy disagreements between the candidates. However, the potential harm to democratic institutions from distrusting losers can, perhaps, be minimized if Republican office-holders and Republican-leaning media figures speak out forcefully and regularly between now and election day about their nominee's comments. Trump supporters need to hear from other prominent figures that a loss would be legitimate. Admirably, some Republicans, including House speaker Paul Ryan, have already begun to dispute Trump's claims in the name of protecting citizens' confidence in democracy. Others must follow their lead, and quickly. ■

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