

Reforms Needed At All Levels - Part I - Addressing Trump's Efforts To Discredit The Electoral Process

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Political reform activists and groups such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters will have their hands full in the coming year! Not only has President Trump done incalculable damage to the democratic process nationally, but our political and governmental processes at the state and local levels are badly in need of repair. The Ohio General Assembly is still reeling from the impacts of the major scandal involving Former Speaker of the House Larry Householder and First Energy. Meanwhile in Cincinnati, two members of City Council face charges of selling their support for a proposed development project, while another has already been convicted on a similar charge.

Let's deal with the national scene first. For four years, Trump has behaved more like an autocrat than a democratically elected President under oath to uphold the Constitution while working with the other equal branches of government. His impeachment by the House of Representatives, based on his attempts to make a deal with a foreign government to help smear a political opponent, is one major example of abusing his executive powers for personal gain. His use of his Office to promote his hotels or his holding of campaign events at the White House are two other examples.

However, his ongoing attacks on the democratic process, the very system that made him President, stand as his most damaging legacy. From the very beginning, Trump belittled elections as rampant with fraud and subject to major abuse. Even after winning the 2016 election, he could not accept the fact that he lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton. "Illegal votes," especially those of undocumented immigrants, were the reason for Clinton's higher total. On the other hand, he refused to accept the fact of Russian meddling in that election, and mocked the Mueller Report as "a witch hunt."

One of his first actions as President was to establish a Commission to investigate fraud in our election systems. Although packed with appointees who accepted the President's unfounded views, it failed to come up with any compelling evidence proving the prevalence of voter fraud. Meanwhile, good government groups that do research on this topic have found no data that supports Trump's rhetoric.

For his entire time in office Trump has continued to complain about voter fraud, and his rants on the subject picked up momentum in this election cycle. When more and more states began to make accommodations for mail-in voting during the pandemic, he started to make the case that mail-in voting leads to massive voter fraud, and that this method of voting would lead to "a rigged election." Once again, no evidence supported this claim, and several states that already use mail-in ballots as their primary system of voting could point to records of efficient and honest elections.

Trump also contended that previous elections were decided by the vote tallies on

election night, and that it is wrong if vote counting continues for several days. His final pitch at his many rallies was that the only way he could possibly lose to Biden was in a rigged election. Thus, he primed his base to blame a crooked system if he lost.

A representative democracy requires citizens to trust the outcomes of the election system. Most scholars agree that if citizens no longer believe that their votes count, then democracy is in trouble. Trump has spent his entire Presidency casting doubt on our electoral process, and he has amplified his efforts to a dangerous degree in the weeks following the November 3rd election.

While much of the vote in states across the country were still uncounted, the President declared himself the winner on election night. In the past, TV networks often declared Presidential winners on that night if tabulations in enough states with sufficient electoral votes showed wide enough margins to make such calls. In fact, states come up with their final vote totals several weeks later. However, it is unprecedented for a Presidential candidate to publicly declare victory when so many key states are still too close to call. Trump publicly told his supporters he had won, and that if further counting gave Biden the win, then those votes were fraudulent.

This declaration of victory set up the Trump team's justification for implementing its plans to overturn the election results once the networks called Biden the winner on Saturday November 7th. This plan included a series of court cases challenging the voting procedures in key states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, and Georgia. In these legal efforts led by former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, massive voter fraud and illegal voting procedures were cited. In case after case, these charges were thrown out by the courts, because no evidence was submitted to show actual fraud or election misconduct. Our judicial system upheld the rule of law, and one Trump appointed federal judge offered a scathing rebuke for the lack of substance of one of these court challenges.

Legal challenges to an election are not unprecedented, and courts do provide a way to question or challenge an actual case of fraud or political criminality. Although Trump's cases lacked any substance, they still were an accepted public procedure. His next actions, according to a number of legal experts, move to a stage of impeachable offenses. They certainly pose a threat to a working democracy.

What Trump and his allies began to do was personally call and meet with state election overseers and other elected Republican officials to try to persuade them to intervene in state elections where Biden had won. The President actually met with officials in Michigan designated to certify the vote in that state, and efforts still continue to convince Republican State Legislatures to select Electoral College voters who support Trump rather than slates that reflect Biden's popular vote victories. So far there is no evidence that these tactics are succeeding, but they certainly exhibit actions that would normally be deemed as illegal interferences in the public procedures established to maintain honest election systems. Voters are meant to determine elections rather than behind the scene bargains between a candidate and officials.

Even as late as December 1st, the Trump team sent out an email to thousands of people with the stated goal of soliciting donations from its receivers to finance efforts to stop "the Radical Left from stealing the election." Some have already asked: "What will these funds actually be used for?" Beyond that question, this email still promotes the assumption that the election results are fraudulent, and democracy in the U.S. is not to be trusted.

Despite all these coup-like activities, we must assume that Joe Biden will be sworn into Office In January. Once this changeover happens, a lot of reforms to our political/ governmental process need to be promoted. If the Biden/ Harris Administration keeps its promise to govern for "all the people," including Trump supporters, this will be a step in the right direction. Meanwhile, the various democratic reform groups in the country must mount a vigorous grassroots campaign to convince people that representative democracy is still the best governmental system, even if it needs some reforming in this country. A bevy of reforms including protecting voting rights, eliminating gerrymandered districts, and curbing the power of "big money" to dominate politics and government must be championed. Finally, reformers cannot assume that Trumpism is dead just because we have escaped this initial scare of a slide toward autocratic white populism. There is even a rumor that Trump may announce his 2024 campaign for President on Inauguration Day. (To be continued.)