

Election Leads to Reflections on Democracy

The Wired Word for the Week of November 15, 2020

In the News

The large number of votes cast for president following the starkly different campaigns of the two leading candidates has led several commentators to reflect on the importance of democracy.

For example, on the evening after the election, before enough votes had been counted to project who won, news anchor Lester Holt closed the *NBC Nightly News* program by saying, "We don't know who the winner is, and there may be twists and turns ahead. But we voted like we have rarely voted before. We defied predictions of mass chaos."

Holt continued, "The votes are being counted -- not as fast as we want -- but democracy is working, and we are proving once again that it is *our* votes that count. We are not statistical models; we are Americans."

We indeed "voted like we have rarely voted before." According to *Bloomberg News*, the total number of votes cast for president range from about 157.1 million to 165.0 million, which is 68.6 percent to 72.1 percent of the citizen voting-age population. As of the November 8 tabulations, the 2020 turnout already exceeds 2016 in 43 states, and by the time of this writing, a week after the election, some states were still counting votes.

CNBC noted that the "projected vote total marks a record high number of ballots cast in a presidential election and the highest voter turnout rate among eligible citizens since 1900.

Like most people, including government leaders, do today, Holt referred to our form of government as a democracy. While that's true in the way the term has come to be applied in the United States today, technically, our country is a democratic republic, which means it's governed by elected representatives. It's also a democracy, but not the kind where the citizens make the governing decisions directly; rather it's an indirect democracy, where our elected representatives make the decisions, within the limits set by the constitution.

Nonetheless, using democracy as it's commonly employed to describe our form of government today, many Americans would likely agree with Winston Churchill's remark "Democracy is the worst system, except for all the other systems." (Churchill scholars say he was quoting someone else, but TWW has been unable to learn who originated the quote.)

So important is democracy that it has sometimes unofficially been referred to in explicitly religious terms. A month before the election, a Democratic congressman called President Trump "[a threat to our sacred democracy](#)." And Vice President Mike Pence used [explicitly religious language](#) in his speech at the Republican National Convention in August.

Jeff Stack, a protester against any vote-counting stoppage at a post-election rally in Missouri, said, "[Votes are the host, they are a holy item right](#)." ("Host" refers to the consecrated bread used in Holy Communion.)

Two days after the election, Anthony D. Baker, a professor of systematic theology at Seminary of the Southwest, addressed the question "Is democracy sacred?" in *The Conversation*. He identified some commonalities between nations and religions. Both, he said, are institutions and both are held together by rituals.

"A nation coming together to vote may feel a bit like a faith community gathering for worship, especially given that many places of worship double as voting stations," Baker said.

But he also said there are important limits on the "analogy between political and religious activity."

Citing the 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, whom Baker called "one of the most influential Christian thinkers on the boundary between the political and the sacred," he noted that Aquinas defined politics as "the way humans organize their common pursuit of a good life, a life formed by virtues like courage." Thus, said Baker, "If we could all be courageous together, we would be well on our way to being good citizens."

But, Baker said, though politics relies on virtue, "this does not make it religious."

To be religious, Aquinas said that one had to take in how situations exist "in relation to God," and this involves things that are learned through revelation and accepted by faith.

Political virtue, said Baker, "will always involve the possibility of coercion for those who fail to practice it." A state needs a police force so it can protect vulnerable people from failures in virtue."

In contrast, said Baker, "sacred practices like worship and prayer require the opposite: a freedom from state coercion, so that people can practice religion without that religion being legally enforced. ... A good government will allow for people to pursue the sacred. It will not, though, confuse its own potentially coercive virtues with those sacred practices."

When penning the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote regarding basic human rights, "we hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable." It was Benjamin Franklin who suggested the final wording: not sacred but "self-evident."

Aquinas, Baker said, would agree with the change Franklin made. Whatever adjectives we might use to describe our form of government, "sacred" isn't one of them.

Thus, the document describing the rights the American colonies were willing to fight for declares "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. --That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. ..."

There are critically important words there, and we might even say life-preserving ones: "created equal," "unalienable rights," "governments ... deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." We will reserve "sacred" for things related to God, while recognizing that our commitment to the Lord can help us promote and support equality, unalienable rights and the benefits of democracy for all.

Lester Holt concluded his post-election comments by urging viewers, while waiting to see who the next president would be, to remember that "bitterness and disappointment are not new to elections. We all know that losing is the worst. But we all know that our fight should be for a more perfect union, not against each other."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Is Democracy Sacred? *The Conversation*](#)

[Voter Turnout Hits Historic Levels With States Still Counting Votes. *Bloomberg*](#)

[2020 Election Sees Record High Turnout With at Least 159.8 Million Votes Projected. *CNBC*](#)

[Lester Holt Reflects on the Election as Votes Continue to be Tallied. *NBC Nightly News*](#)

The Big Questions

1. Was the United States founded as a Christian nation? How do you think the founding fathers would answer that question? What are some definitions of "a Christian nation" and how do they affect your answer?
2. How does your understanding of "separation of church and state" help you decide how to function as a citizen of the United States? as a citizen of God's kingdom?
3. In what ways, if any, might political partisanship be an honoring of God? In what ways, if any, might political partisanship be an dishonoring of God? In the latter case, what might be the alternative?
4. Can truths be both "self-evident" and "sacred"? If so, give an example. If not, tell why not. What are some truths that are sacred but not necessarily self-evident? What makes a thing self-evident? What makes a thing sacred?
5. What would make our country "a more perfect union"?