

Rep. Vruwink: Tumultuous elections are common

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Many people have expressed concern about casting an absentee ballot in this year's election. Is it going to be counted; will it be safe to drop it in the ballot box; will it be counted after the election if it is postmarked before Election Day on November 3?

This isn't the first election in our country's history that has raised questions about our democratic process.

The third presidential election on our nation's history in 1796 was the first election in which political parties played a dominant role, and the only presidential election in which a president, John Adams, and vice president, Thomas Jefferson, were elected from opposing parties. The campaign was a bitter one, with one party accusing the other of promoting violence and the other party accusing the opposition of promoting monarchs and aristocracy. Adams won.

In the next election in 1800, Jefferson challenged President Adams. When the popular vote went to the Electoral College, Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr each received the same number of electoral votes: 73. Burr saw a chance to become president rather than vice president because the electors did not have to specify which of their votes was cast for president and which was for vice president.

As required by the U.S. Constitution, the House of Representatives would have to decide the election. The House voted 36 times before Jefferson was declared victorious. Electors had originally intended Jefferson to become President, and with his election in the House, crisis was averted. In 1804, our country ratified the 12th Amendment to prevent this uncertainty from happening again. The 12th Amendment requires electors to specify whether their votes are for President or Vice President.

Another test to our democracy was the election of 1876. The results of this election was a mess. Nineteen electoral votes from four states were in dispute. Samuel Tilden had a lead of more than 260,000 popular votes. But Tilden had assessed only 184 electoral votes, one shy of what he needed.

The Constitution provided no way of resolving the dispute, and now Congress had to decide. Congress created a bipartisan commission to decide the outcome. The commission awarded all 19 contested electoral votes to Tilden's opponent, Rutherford B. Hayes, despite Tilden having 260,000 more popular votes. The deal worked out by both political parties, which became known as the Compromise of 1877, avoided a national crisis but returned power back to southern states and ended the process of Reconstruction.

Most recently was the uncertainty of the 2020 election. Many states were still using the punch card ballot, a voting system created in the 1960s. Even though these ballots had a long history of machine malfunctions and missed votes, no one seemed to care until it created a problem in the George Bush and Al Gore presidential race.

More than 60,000 ballots in Florida – most of them punch cards – showed vote for president. Circular paper holes on many punch cards were still hanging onto the ballots. Because these “hanging chads” were in question, Gore went to court to determine voter intent. The Florida Supreme Court ordered a hand count of ballots.

The U.S. Supreme Court said the ballots had to be counted by a certain date, in accordance with the U.S. Constitution. Gore ended up losing by 537 votes in Florida, and thus he lost the presidency.

As we approach nearly 250 years of democracy in the United States, we have survived many challenges to our electoral system. I am confident we will be able to declare a winner in the 2020 election, just as we have done in previous contested elections. It might take longer than we would like, but what's most important is that all the ballots are counted.