

Tommy Enright: Reclaiming our democracy

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Anyone who watched the first presidential debate on September 29th likely went to bed disappointed. The level of public discourse in our country has been plummeting in recent years as our nation has become more divided. Our elected officials are no longer expected to show respect for one another. Attack ads flood our mailboxes. Bipartisanship is scarce if it happens at all. Neighbors & family members don't want to look each other in the eye.

Who benefits from this polarization?

With the 2010 Citizens United decision, the Supreme Court gave constitutional rights meant only for individuals to entities such as corporations, unions, nonprofits and super PACs, and ruled that money spent to influence the political process cannot be limited. As a result, our government today serves powerful special interests, foreign and domestic, instead of the American people.

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To make matters worse, we live in one of the most gerrymandered states in the country. Despite the fact that more than 70 percent of Wisconsin voters support nonpartisan redistricting.

As David Daley so eloquently stated in his Sept. 1 Rolling Stone article, "How rigged are Wisconsin's maps? So rigged that the Harvard's Electoral Integrity Project, which quantifies the health of electoral systems in America and worldwide, rated the state's electoral boundaries as a 3 on a scale of 1 to 100. This is not only the worst rating in the nation, it's lower than any state graded by the EIP has ever

scored on this measure.

This is not a rating received by a functioning democracy. It is the rating of an authoritarian state.”

In Wisconsin, most of our elected officials have zero incentive to actually listen to their constituents. Perhaps this is why Wisconsin was recently called the least-active full-time legislative body in the United States. It brings to mind the saying “government doesn’t work; vote for us and we’ll prove it.”

Last July, Wisconsin Farmers Union released a short video called “Fighting for Democracy: Fair Maps in WI,” which stated that if an elected official doesn’t support nonpartisan redistricting, we need to vote them out. “Elected officials who don’t believe in fair democracy have no business representing their constituents.”

The fact is, our nation isn’t going to magically mend itself.

As long as big money interests have outsized influence in our political system, as long as our elected officials are not beholden to their constituents, the People’s voices will continue to be drowned out, and the frustration that follows will lead to even more polarization.

In a 2015 lecture “Citizenship and Practical Decision Making,” Wisconsin Democracy Campaign Executive Director Matt Rothschild explained, “Many, if not most, of the great social changes over the last 160 years have come about not because a particular politician was elected Senator or President but because people organized themselves at the grassroots and demanded change. That was true for the Women’s Suffrage Movement, the Labor Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and for the great nonviolent movement of our time—the LGBT revolution.”

As Wisconsinites, we need to reclaim our democracy, and that starts by engaging—at the ballot box, in the halls of the Capitol, and in our communities.

-Enright is communications & special projects coordinator with the Wisconsin Farmers Union.