

Opinion: Our republic is gravely sick. A new poll confirms it.

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October 1, 2021 at 3:26 p.m. EDT

Many Americans are increasingly concerned that our national heritage, our democratic republic, is seriously in danger. A new poll from the University of Virginia's Center for Politics confirms that we have reason to worry — and that the fault is in ourselves, not our political stars.

We can see the signs of the fraying bonds of citizenship all around us. The increasingly hostile tone of mainstream political speech. The inability of our two parties to find common ground in cases of clear national interest, such as raising the debt ceiling. The way that leaders of each side accuse the other of intentionally subverting the election process to ensure their hold on power. The fact that partisans increasingly isolate themselves in information bubbles where they only hear their side of an argument and often only the extreme elements of that side.

That's why the Center for Politics poll is so worrying. It surveyed 2,000 voters on a host of issues related to democratic health, especially how each viewed members and leaders of the other party. It found that large numbers of Joe Biden and Donald Trump voters view the other party with fear and contempt.

The most frightening findings show that supermajorities of voters in each camp believe the other side is bent on destroying the country. More than 80 percent of Biden and Trump voters agree that elected officials of the other party “present a clear and present danger to American democracy.” More than 70 percent of both sets of voters believe that some extreme media voices on the other side should be censored “despite the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment.” More than 75 percent of Biden and Trump voters believe that Americans who strongly support the opposite party also threaten the American way of life. In short, politics has stopped being about how to govern a shared country and is more about a naked, “Lord of the Flies”-style struggle for power.

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It should be no surprise, then, that voters on both sides of the partisan divide are embracing views that are inconsistent with democracy. More than 60 percent of Biden voters and roughly 80 percent of Trump voters believe things like “true citizen[s]” should “help eliminate the evil that poisons our country from within” and America “needs a powerful leader to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today.” Nearly identical shares of both sets of partisans — about 45 percent — say America would be better off if the president could take “needed actions without being constrained by the Congress or the courts.” There's a word for a strong leader whose word is law: dictator.

Substantial numbers of Americans in each camp are even willing to break up the country. Forty-one percent of Biden voters and 52 percent of Trump voters say the “situation in America is such” that they would favor Blue or Red states “seceding from the union to form their own country.” That would surely fail if only one side wanted a separation. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the separate states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, however, shows what might happen if enough people want it.

Note that this is not a case where one side holds problematic views while the other does not. Democrats and Republicans harbor hatred for members of the opposing party in nearly equal measures, and both view anti-democratic practices with nearly equal regard. This corroborates data from the Pew Research Institute, which has found that partisan animosity has risen and is widely shared by each party's supporters.

The poll points to a frightening future, but we have resolved such moments before. We have done this peacefully, aside from the Civil War, because shrewd leaders such as Thomas Jefferson defused conflicts by persuading large numbers of the other side's partisans to defect to new coalitions. Supermajorities of Americans supported these coalitions over many elections, establishing a new political order democratically. The new regime also did not suppress the basic rights of its adversaries, maintaining commitment to free speech, free elections and the rule of law. That political understanding and skill is why America's experiment in self-government has endured for so long.

The cup of conflict will not pass from our lips no matter how much we pray. We will pass through this trial strong and intact only if we imitate Jefferson and are guided more by what we will build than by whom we will destroy. Our edifice must have as its cornerstone the fundamental American truth: “that all men are created equal ... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” Only dedication to that principle will enable us to transcend our present division into warring tribes and recover the shared sense of citizenship we so sorely want and need.