

Saving our Democracy

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 20 January 2021 08:02 -

<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/trump-insurgents-enter1-s5.png>



We can bridge a divided nation by reflecting on our own attitudes and behaviors, but it's also up to elected officials to be truthful and honest and restore trust in our democratic process.

MADISON - Now is the time when our government should be focusing on our COVID-19 recovery. Wisconsin leaders should be fixing the unemployment insurance crisis, working on the COVID-19 vaccination roll-out and expanding broadband access for every rural household. This is what I'd rather spend my time on. Sadly, other issues have overshadowed the essential work that should be happening because our nation is as divided as it's ever been.

The shocking attack on our nation's Capitol earlier this month left Americans with all sorts of questions. How did we get to this point? How were we so unprepared on that day, despite all of the warning signs? What can we do differently to bridge the rift we're experiencing these days? As Americans, we must reflect on these questions and consider what we, personally, can do to be more empathetic and humble listeners. But it's also up to our country's leaders to set the right example through their speech and actions.



I know some may react negatively to my call for civility, truth and compromise because I'm a partisan office holder. It's no secret I take stands on issues and plead with the Majority Party to act on policies I consider important based on views from people in the 31st Senate District. But,

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my role in advocating for these policies is drastically different than using fear to drive citizens to hijack our democratic process.

What can elected leaders do to change the political climate? We should start by toning down the political rhetoric and admitting when bad actors are misleading citizens. We've seen what happens when people are consumed by conspiracy theories and how passion drives them to act violently. As much as I'd like for our politics to change, it can only happen with the cooperation of the Party in charge.

I appealed to my colleagues on the Senate floor last Tuesday by introducing a Senate Resolution condemning the misinformation and violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. The Resolution also recognizes our country has a new President and Vice-President and offers condolences to the family of U.S. Capitol Police Officer Brian D. Sicknick who was killed by the violent mob on January 6th.

The Majority Party failed to take a stand against the violence and conspiracy theories. This same attitude led us to the situation we're in today. During this dark time in our country's history, our elected officials must lead rather than shrink away. Elected officials have a responsibility to inform their supporters that the election was fair and legitimate.

There may even be some of my legislative colleagues who, themselves, have become convinced conspiracy claims are true. If that's so, we have a lot more work to do to rebuild relationships in our country, especially considering many of these elected officials were reelected during the 2020 election.

Democracy is built on the assertion that the person with the most votes wins. I'm old enough to remember that Joe Looby won the Assembly District seat I grew up in by a single vote. He was forever known as "landslide Looby" after that. The obligatory recount after the election did nothing to change the final result. In 2010, I lost a close election that also went through a recount, which only verified the initial result. I know the pain of losing, but also know it's necessary to accept results and find other ways to peacefully advocate for what I believe in.

As elected leaders, we must understand that our constituents rely on us to be truthful and sometimes painfully honest with them. When a leader is silent about misinformation or repeat it

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without verification, it can be seen as supporting falsehoods and creating a fictitious reality. We must not abuse our platform as leaders; we've seen this happen and how dangerous it can be.

Last Tuesday, the Wisconsin State Senate showed a glimmer of hope by voting on a compromise COVID-19 response bill supported by our Democratic Governor and the Republican Majority leader. I hope we can build on that – it's the only way this democratic republic will survive.