Opinion
NCR Voices

A supporter of Republican President-elect Donald Trump celebrates at his victory rally.

A supporter of Republican President-elect Donald Trump celebrates at his victory rally at the Palm Beach County Convention Center in West Palm Beach, Fla., Nov. 6 after Trump was elected the 47th president of the United States. (OSV News/Reuters/Carlos Barria)



by Michael Sean Winters

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I am shocked, but not surprised.

We knew that approximately half the country, for various reasons, would be supporting former president Donald Trump. We knew it. But seeing the vote totals come in, and the states on the TV maps turn red, the reality seems so much more horrific than the prospect.

The reality is this: The hardest thing for a democracy to contend against is a demagogue who successfully exploits democratic means to achieve anti-democratic ends. Trump's repulsive ideas now have the weight of popular endorsement.

I do not for a second believe most Americans actually want to see mass deportations or political opponents locked up or billionaires getting new tax cuts. But they were willing to look away from those evils to support someone who channeled their anger, who stokes their anger when it wanes, and who cloaks himself in it to undertake truly terrible things.

The question for those of us who have feared this result is a simple one: How do we protect democracy?

The separation of powers was devised by the founders in order to frustrate tyrannical ambitions. It is not yet clear which party will control the House of Representatives, but it appears the Republicans will control the Senate by a slim margin. The Senate's constitutional power to refuse to confirm Trump's appointments will be in play and, as I have noted previously, in the case of nominations of military officers, the consequence of a GOP failure to refuse the confirmation of dangerous nominees is potentially catastrophic. Nothing is scarier than the U.S. military being politicized.

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The third branch of government, the judiciary, may be the most important barrier to Trump's power. The Supreme Court's decision in *Trump* v. *United States* granted broad immunity to a president, but that case was mostly theoretical. It also was not as bad as some hyperventilating analysts claimed.

When the rubber meets the road, and the justices have a case in which key democratic norms are at stake, I just don't see Chief Justice John Roberts or Associate Justice Amy Coney Barrett selling democracy down the river. If, for example, Trump really does take action against Liz Cheney, I don't think the Supreme Court will back him.

Democracy is not only about placing guardrails on the exercise of power. It is about values, and one value specifically: human dignity. Democracy assigns one vote to one person. No person has more inherent value than another. Indeed, the guardrails on government power were designed to ensure the freedom of individuals and

groups to govern themselves in most areas of social life. Healthy democracies honor the dignity of all citizens, not just at the ballot box, but in the tax code, in the allotment of government benefits, in protections for the infirm and the elderly, in laws against discrimination and subsidies to encourage opportunity broadly.

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As we prepare for Trump to return to the White House, there are specific groups whose dignity is threatened, and that warrant our protection. Here the church can play a special role. Immigrants will be terrified. Trump has been explicit about his desire for mass deportations. The Catholic Church has embraced its biblical and doctrinal mandate to defend the migrant and has sued state governments that have sought to obstruct our ministries to migrants. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops must start preparing briefs to fight any effort at mass deportation at the national level.

The consequences for climate change policy are disastrous and potentially irreversible.

There is probably very little anyone can do to save the human dignity and freedom of the brave people of Ukraine. No one is more happy about the election result than Russian dictator Vladimir Putin. Trump has said he will bring peace to Ukraine in a day. That may be a ridiculous claim but it is doubtful Trump will sustain the level of support for Ukraine that Biden has done. The Ukrainian government needs to think about what is the least terrible option.

America's allies will tremble at this result and part of our democratic ethos entails promoting democracy abroad.

"A large majority of the French public favored Kamala Harris and the victory of Trump scares the political establishment," Antoine de Tarle, a contributor at the French Catholic journal Etudes told me via email. "One of the main reasons for this reaction is Ukraine. The country is close to French borders and most people are afraid of a deal between Trump and Putin that would threaten several members of the European Union including Poland and the Baltic states."

DeTarle also worries about consequences of Trump’s win on French politics. "*Rassemblement National*, the far right party of Marine Le Pen, has always supported

Putin and Trump but its leaders are aware that this position is not popular and they avoid the topic," he said. "However, they could change their attitude in case of a Trump victory."

The Democratic Party must now commence some serious soul-searching. That is a column for another day.

The word that keeps welling up in my mind is catastrophic. The nation is angry and anger has found its champion. Unfortunately, the American people have made that champion the most powerful person in the world. The foreseeable consequences are terrifying. The unforeseeable consequences may be worse. We survived one term. Can we survive a second?

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.