

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2025

STIRIB VOICES

Minnesota Star Tribune

DEMOCRACY

Oct 8 2025

P. A. 9

Don't let despair discourage you from voting

Especially here in Minnesota, which is turnout territory.



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It happened again last Sunday, much as it has at similar gatherings all year. An older woman with a worried visage approached me after a book event, wanting to talk.

"I've almost given up reading the paper and watching the news," she said in a confessional tone. "I get so upset about what's happening in our state and in our country."

As I had done before, I sounded a note of empathy – or tried to, as much as a news-junkie journalist can – before I encouraged her to rethink her choices. Avoiding the news might spare her some immediate discomfort, I said. But it's a poor strategy for sustaining democracy.

And sustaining democracy needs to be a high priority for every conscientious citizen now, I counseled.

Did I persuade her to keep reading, for example, this newspaper? I'm not sure. Vice President Kamala Harris and other Democrats demonstrated a year ago that asking voters to perceive a threat to democracy in the proposals of President Donald Trump and his MAGA allies was not a winning strategy.

What's more, the connection between staying informed via reliable news sources (for example, this newspaper) and maintaining a government of, by and for the people is lost on many voters.

But since then, Trump's campaign proposals have become unilateral executive actions. Americans have endured arbitrary tariffs, sweeping federal layoffs, cruel deportations, coercive funding impoundments, legally dubious military deployments — all without the blessing of Congress and, in most cases, still awaiting the judgment of the judicial branch. A highly unpopular federal government shutdown is in force at this writing.

Since then, too, Minnesotans have witnessed horrific gun violence — including the assassination of a veteran legislative leader — followed by the apparent inability of the Legislature to respond to the will of this state's majority about guns.

Those stories are still unfolding. But their outlines are clear — and clearly anti-democratic.

What's not yet clear is how Americans, particularly those of us in "the state that votes," will respond.

What I've seen and heard so far, based on admittedly anecdotal evidence, has me worried. To be sure, some Minnesotans are doubling down on democracy. They're campaigning, organizing rallies, participating in prayer vigils at the State Capitol.



LEILA NAVIDI • The Minnesota Star Tribune

Despair about the nation's politics is the authoritarian's ally. It's paralyzing. Instead of inspiring political action, it leads to disengagement.

But too many people appear to be discouraged about what the representative democracies designed in the 18th and 19th centuries can produce now. They might agree with the New York Times poll last month that found 64% of Americans believing that the country is too deeply divided to solve its problems using the nation's current political system.

Among some ordinarily engaged Minnesotans, the attitude goes beyond discouragement. "I'd call it despair," a similarly concerned pastor of a downtown Minneapolis church told me recently. "People feel so hopeless."

Despair about the nation's politics is the authoritarian's ally. It's paralyzing. Instead of inspiring political action, it leads to disengagement — the kind that people have lately been confessing to me.

It depresses voter turnout. And low-turnout elections can

put democracy into a tailspin. They can empower the political extremes at the expense of more moderate majorities, leading to the discrediting of those elected and disgust with the process that put them into office.

That's a real risk — not in the far-off, far-away future, but right here in Minneapolis and St. Paul, right now. Early voting has begun in this year's city elections.

More than ever, I'm rooting for high turnout in our two river cities. As always, those elected deserve the legitimacy that high turnout confers. (That's one of the reasons the two towns opted for ranked-choice voting more than a decade ago. They aimed to get rid of low-turnout primaries.)

But high turnout this year would carry special significance. It would send a message to the nation — and to ourselves — that democracy is alive and unsuppressed at

the northern end of the Mississippi River. It would be a show of political strength and relevance at a time when blue-voting cities are under presidential assault, verbal and potentially otherwise. It would remind state politicians that these Twin Cities are too politically potent to be ignored.

Four years ago, amid a lingering COVID pandemic and in the wake of the racial justice protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd, turnout in the Minneapolis city election reached 54%, the highest in 45 years. If those events could propel city dwellers in large numbers to the polls, can those voters be persuaded that this year's events warrant a similar response?

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