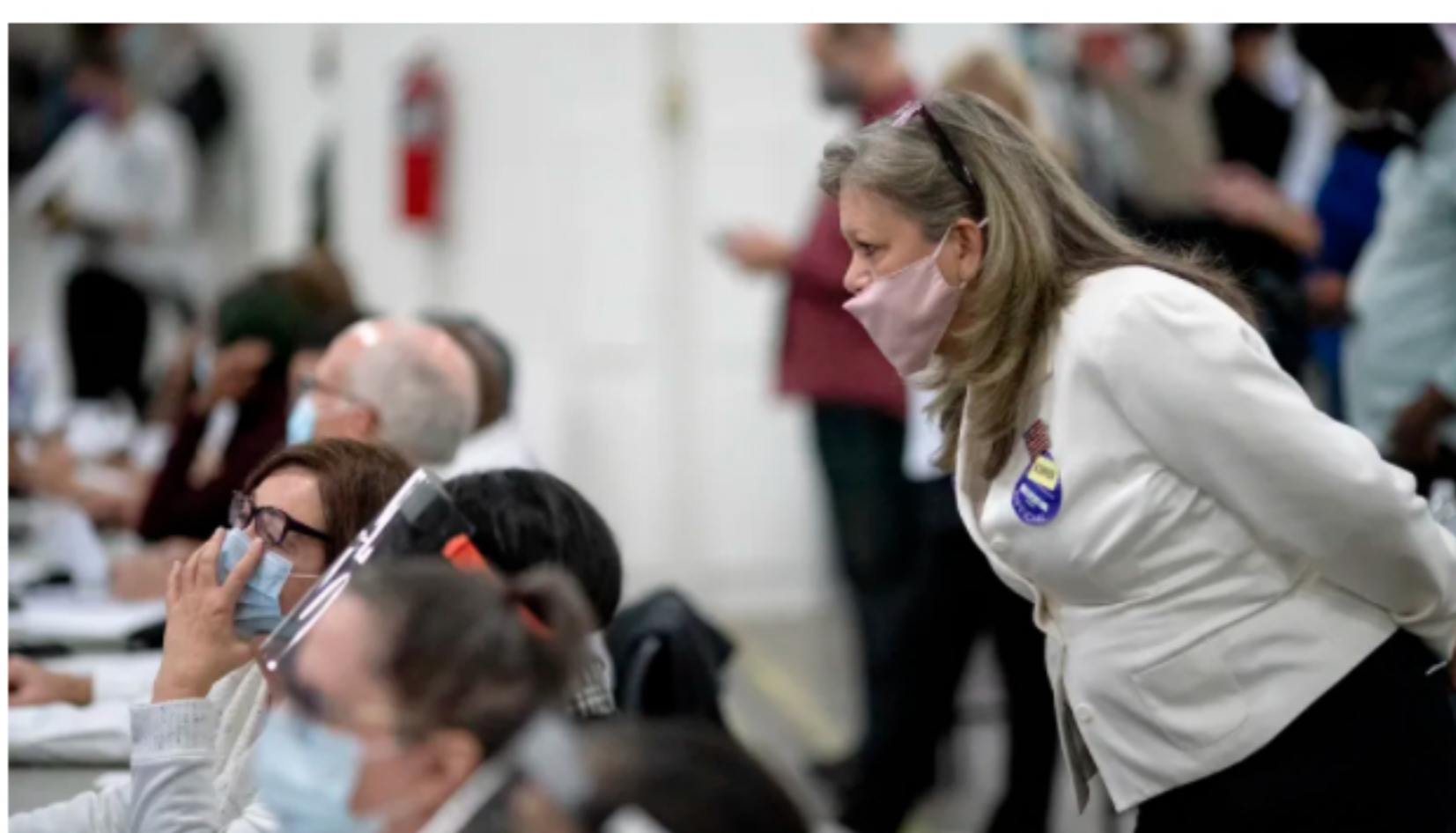


Can we restore trust in the government, democracy and each other? | Column

Restoring trust in each other and society is a long-term project. Democracy is fragile and depends upon citizens' acceptance of the rules of the game.



A Republican election challenger at right watches over election inspectors as they examine a ballot as votes are counted into the early morning hours, Nov. 4, 2020, at the central counting board in Detroit. A review by The Associated Press in the six battleground states disputed by former President Donald Trump has found fewer than 475 cases of potential voter fraud, a minuscule number that would have made no difference in the 2020 presidential election. Democrat Joe Biden won Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and their 79 Electoral College votes by a combined 311,257 votes out of 25.5 million ballots cast for president. (AP Photo/David Goldman, file) [DAVID GOLDMAN | AP]

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American society today suffers from an overall lack of trust in the government, democracy and each other. This lack of trust has damaged the core of America's political and social institutions. Consider the following:

Millions of Americans do not trust the electoral process and question the legitimacy of our democracy. Our electoral system is seen by many as corrupt and controlled by corporations and the wealthy elite. The continuous Republican attacks and lies about the last election have furthered the image of a country unable to honestly and legitimately collect ballots.

Transparency International recently ranked the United States as only the 27th least corrupt country in the world. This independent nonprofit organization is widely respected for its work documenting corruption in public life. Its annual Corruption Perception Index (CPI), "ranks 180 countries and territories around the world by their perceived levels of public sector corruption. The results are given on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean)." Unfortunately, the U.S. fared very poorly on this index with a CPI score of 67. The least corrupt countries were Denmark, Finland and New Zealand with scores of 88. Transparency International attributed the low U.S. rating to "the persistent attacks against free and fair elections, culminating in a violent assault on the US Capitol, and an increasingly opaque campaign finance system."

Too many Americans now do not trust each other and consider the opposing political party "the enemy" to be defeated at all cost. Too many now believe that when the opposition party wins an election it is the result of fraud. Our country is filled with attempts to overturn elections, block basic voting rights and suppress votes. These ongoing attacks on American democracy undermine the welfare and security of our country.

Millions of Americans do not trust the government to do the right thing to protect their health. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic killed Americans at a far higher rate than people in other wealthy nations. Despite having a powerful arsenal of vaccines, the U.S. failed to vaccinate as many people as other large, wealthy nations. According to *The New York Times*, since Dec 1, when omicron was first identified in the United States, the share of Americans killed by the coronavirus is at least 63 percent higher than in any of the other large, wealthy nations. Among rich nations the U.S. has had the largest share of its population die from COVID-19 over the entire pandemic.

The peer-reviewed medical journal *The Lancet* documents how these differences in death rates in rich countries can be better understood when examined in relation to trust in government. On Feb. 12 *The Lancet* released its examination of how 177 countries prepared for a potential pandemic and how they then fared in infections and death rates.

The results were counter-intuitive. The rich countries were expected to do better in combatting COVID-19 as they were much better prepared. Yet many rich countries did much worse. Countries such as Denmark, Vietnam and South Korea, where citizens' trust in government and in each other was high, did very well combatting the coronavirus. Where that trust did not exist, such as in the U.S., the country did very poorly. The study revealed that death and infection rates were much higher where there is low trust in government and high political polarization.

Restoring trust in each other and society is a long-term project. Democracy is fragile and depends upon citizens' acceptance of the rules of the game. Unfortunately, too many Americans today reject the legitimacy of our institutions and instead threaten to bring it all down. What steps can we take to create inclusive citizenship in which all Americans feel their interests can be at least heard and respected?

A place to begin is to adopt policies that offer economic prosperity and respect to all citizens — minority and majority. Most people are motivated by reasonable concerns and want to get along with their neighbors. Economist Eduardo Porter identifies a number of potentially successful avenues to salvage our liberal democracy. For example, a "program of national service requiring every 18-year-old to work on community projects and build public goods could mix young people from all backgrounds and help start urgently needed conversations across identity frontiers."

Other policies could include integrating schools, that are now increasingly segregated by class and race, and incentives to build affordable housing. Trust can only slowly be built by "living next to each other, going to school together, and sharing the granular challenges of life." It will take hard work and a long-term vision to restore political and social trust among the American people.

William F. Felice is professor emeritus of political science at Eckerd College He is the author of six books on human rights and international relations. He can be reached via his website at williamfelice.com.