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Americans Are Ready for Debacle to End

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WE ARE all watching a national tragedy unfold before our eyes, yet no one is talking about it.

Since Nov. 7, Americans have been focused on wanting their favorite presidential candidate to win and wanting the process of declaring a winner to be over. But this is terribly short-sighted. There is much more at stake-and nearly lost.

The stage was set for this tragedy during the last five decades, as voter turnout and public interest in politics have fallen dramatically. Attack advertising stemming from scandals from Watergate to Monica Lewinsky, along with live television coverage of partisan-based and contentious arguing on Capitol Hill have given us all plenty of reasons to lose faith in the system.

American's vote really makes a difference.

Electoral victories have typically been by huge margins. Surveys done the week before elections almost always picked the winner correctly, as have political scientists' statistical models that used only information available nine months before Election Day. And exit polls have permitted accurate predictions of outcomes even before the polls close. No wonder so many Americans stayed home Nov. 7.

The election of 2000 could have changed all that in one fell swoop. Almost all the pre-election polls incorrectly said George W. Bush would win the popular vote nationwide. Not one political scientist's model called it right either. On election night, the television networks' exit polls got it wrong time and again. And here we sit staring at a razor-thin margin in Florida.

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Nothing more could have happened this fall to convince people that election outcomes aren't predetermined and that one vote really can make a difference.

But then, the tragedy began to unfold. Remarkably, though, the problem is not where most people seem to think it is-antiquated punch-card technology, local election officials with the discretion to design ballots that confuse voters, machines that miscount ballots, murky rules about handling overseas ballots without postmarks, dimpled chads.

Americans are used to these sorts of problems. The tragedy is not that they occurred but rather in how we are handling them now. When referees are uncertain of whether a football team has made a first down, out comes the chain to measure for sure.

So in the contest of George W. Bush and [Al Gore](#), we should quickly and resolutely have brought in the chain.

This is a straightforward measurement problem, and we social scientists are very familiar with the challenges inherent in measurement. We know that errors will creep into any single counting of a set of ballots, whether by a machine or by people. We know that counters with biases occasionally misperceive ambiguous ballots to be in line with their predilections and occasionally misrecord their readings of ballots, again in line with their hopes.

So we count, and we count again, and we count a third time. We ask multiple people with opposing biases to independently count the same ballots, and we gauge their agreement and error rates. We test the reliability and validity of the counting machines. And with all that information in hand, we produce a solid count of the votes cast and a solid assurance that the small amount of error in the count did not cause a mistake in identifying the winner.

This is what we should have done in Florida. We should have recounted ballots in every precinct in the state. Not just the biggest ones in which Al Gore had a lead. And not just the ones that the candidates themselves asked to have recounted.

In fact, the handling of this crisis should not have been up to the candidates at all.

This election belongs to us, the American people. We should end up with the assurance that the best counting possible was done and that every vote had its fair chance to determine our next president. Letting Al Gore concede when he's ready or relying on the legal system's responses to charges filed by the candidates is exactly the wrong way to handle it.

What we need are heroes.

Heroes who would say first and foremost that government must be responsible

for both identifying a winner in this election and redesigning the system for future elections. Heroes who would say we must take our time, bring in the scientific method and reach an answer that all Americans can believe is the truth as best we can determine it. Heroes who would say there is no reason to rush in answering this tremendously important question. Heroes who would say we should spend whatever resources it takes so no American's voice is muted.

Heroes who would say that it should not be up to the candidates to push their personal interests to make recounts happen.

Heroes who would say that it is far more important that the integrity of the system and the trustworthiness of our government be preserved than to grab for short-term control of the [White House](#).

But we have seen nothing of the sort. From start to finish, we have seen partisanship driving the bus in a national debate supposedly about fairness of process. Politicians, justices, county election officials and ordinary Americans alike have been divided sharply about what is fair and what a person thinks is fair (depending completely, of course, upon which outcome he or she wants).

What message does this send to Americans? That they should not trust their government to do what is right. That they should assume partisanship runs deep among elected officials, who will pursue the short-term interests of their parties over the long-term interests of the nation as a whole.

That policy-making efforts produce not what is best for the country but what is best for the party that controls the majority of the relevant legislative body: With a different balance, we would get a different outcome.

That one vote may not count fairly and fully after all, because it can be nullified by the partisan power-wielding of elected officials. And, most tragically, that politicians are not committed first and foremost to fairness and justice for all of their constituents.

Is it too late to prevent these views from becoming cemented in the minds of Americans? After so much has happened, it's hard to imagine what could occur to convince Americans to be optimistic about the future of governing in this country and walk away from this affair uplifted, educated about politics and motivated to play an active part in governing the country in the future.

But despite claims to the contrary, Americans do not love to hate politicians and politics. Social science studies have shown over and over that Americans want their government to be fair in its processes and continue to hope that it will be more committed to justice than to partisanship and divisiveness. While we are still focused on this affair as a nation, there is

time for heroes to emerge-and the public will embrace them if they do.

Have most Americans said they are ready for the debacle to end now because they believe justice has been done? I doubt it. I suspect instead that we are convinced our government will let us down once again, and it's too depressing to watch any more.

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