

The people must step up in 2024

The din around the political process continues to slide into dangerous territory.

How our nation deals with the challenges ahead appears uncertain, ready to falter. There's a stunning lack of critical thinking and little collaboration between differing views. Many don't understand the basics of how our government works.

Democracy is never guaranteed. It must be actively preserved and defended.

As the building blocks of our society are eroded by extremes on both sides of the political spectrum, our agricultural community can act as ballast for common sense. It's no time to be passive. That only leads to more chaos.

How did we get here?

Many people of a certain age will remember learning civics as part of a required school curriculum. Sadly, for today's students, civics is a patchwork of social studies classes that only cover the basics, if it's taught at all.

It is astonishing to me that only seven states require one year of civics or government studies; 13 states have no civics requirement at all.

The disinvestment is not solely at the state level. For nearly the past quarter century, federal spending on civics education has been slashed by more than 90% to just \$4 million a year. That's around five cents per student annually.

The results are not surprising. Only 47% of Americans can name all three branches of government, and 25% cannot name any. More than half feel disaffected by our system of government and pessimistic about our democracy.

If people don't have faith in democracy, it can't function.

Some have lost faith in institutions, from the government to business and the media, not to mention elected officials and our electoral process. That's true no matter who is in charge.

Democracies often don't die with a shot from a gun. They die due to indifference and silence from those who can lead,

including ourselves.

People are key to restoring institutions

Free elections keep our political leaders responsive to the needs of the people. As ordinary citizens, we have a responsibility to understand the world around us and how we elect leaders to represent our interests. Voting keeps everyone accountable, from local school boards to the cities and counties, on up to state elected officials, members of Congress and the president. It only works if we thoughtfully participate.

Some voices have emerged. The Carter Center is leading an effort to turn down anti-democratic noise around elections. They are focusing first on the State of Arizona. The Carter Center has found that distrust of elections has been "normalized" to the extent that some see it as a go-to message in campaigns.

There's a contradiction here. Although such messages are a campaign staple, the great majority of people who live in Arizona actually trust election results.

Restoring civics education will be an important first step. New Jersey recently became the first state in our nation to require that public schools teach media literacy at every grade level, from K-12, as a way to combat misinformation. Advocates say the measure will help students who are bombarded with information from social media and news outlets learn how to discern whether the sources are credible.

Under the law, which takes effect immediately, the state Department of Education must implement literacy curriculum standards. These include researching, using critical thinking skills, and learning the difference between facts and opinions and primary and secondary sources.

The next great test for our nation

Our nation has two paths ahead: one leads to continued self-destruction, and the other, to rebirth.

There's great fear and anxiety over our 2024 presidential election. Free and fair elections could very well be under threat. The last time America elected a president, it led to a deadly assault on



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the U.S. Capitol and a failed coup. That gravely damaged the political system and marred the peaceful transfer of power for the first time in U.S. history.

A year from now, the nation's voters will decide another presidential contest. It will probably pit the same two candidates against each other. Three out of four respondents to a recent poll think American democracy is at risk in the election. Nearly a quarter say patriots may have to use violence to save the country.

In Oregon, Reed College's Elections and Voting Information Center filed a report to the Oregon Legislature. They interviewed county clerks and other elections staff from 34 of Oregon's 36 counties. Secretary of State LaVonne Griffin-Valade told members of the House Rules Committee that the report backed up the hundreds of anecdotes from local officials in Oregon and nationwide about increased stress on election offices.

In Oregon alone, top election officials in 12 counties have left their jobs in the last few years. Many cited fallout from the 2020 election and threats and harassment from a vocal minority who denied election results.

Let our nursery and greenhouse industry choose the higher path, together. Use your position in your community, church, family and nursery operation to urge civility and critical thinking, to achieve a greater understanding of how our nation and our government works.

It is not up to someone else; it is up to the person we see in the mirror every day. The lamp of democracy needs a light, and you are the match. ©