

# VIEWPOINTS

**OTHERS SAY** AL MARTINICH AND TOM PALAIMA  
Special Contributors

## We can save our republic from reckless politicians

"A republic, madam, if you can keep it," was how Benjamin Franklin answered a woman who asked him, as he was leaving the Constitutional Convention, what kind of government had been proposed.

Franklin's answer is precise and clever. A republic, a "res publica," in the sense of the governments of ancient Rome before it became an empire and those in Renaissance Italy, is a civil society that focuses on "the thing of the whole 'populus' or people." It requires individual citizens to participate in their government, not merely as voters, but also as knowledgeable actors in the issues of the day.

The ancient Athenians went so far as to call citizens "agents of the 'polis,'" emphasizing that everyone must be devoted to the common good. People who attended only to their own personal concerns had no place in their democracy. The word for such a person was an "idiotes." We derive our word "idiot" from this term, someone who does not know what we all must know to make society work.

Not all nations and people are fit for republican rule. Because republican citizens participate in their own governance, they need to have many virtues that conduce to the common good beyond being well-informed. Among these are prudence, moderation, courage and a spirit of compromise. Citizens who vote for candidates who intemperately promote individual freedom without concern for the community endanger the republic. Stubborn refusal to change one's opinion in the face of new facts or to recognize

how the interests of others relate to our own is not political courage.

Another, little noticed virtue is also important: restraint.

When Richard Nixon was defeated by John F. Kennedy in 1960, he could have challenged the result because there was evidence of electoral fraud in several places, notably Chicago, where reportedly a number of dead people voted, some more than once. A recount might have made him the winner. For all his faults, Nixon showed restraint. In 2004, John Kerry lost to George W. Bush. He did not challenge the election in court despite serious election irregularities in Ohio. Like Nixon, he exercised restraint rather than exacerbate division.

The nation has not been so fortunate recently. After the election of Barack Obama in 2008, Sen. Mitch McConnell made preventing Obama from being reelected his No. 1 priority. His strategy was to obstruct legislation supported by Obama. Turning the virtue of restraint on its head, he remained silent when rabble-rousers denied that Obama was a legitimate president. McConnell continued along his reckless course after Obama's reelection in 2012.

Refusing to consider any Supreme Court nominee now during Obama's last year in office, McConnell claims that Obama does not have the constitutional right to have his nominee considered. His interpretation of the constitutional injunction for the Senate to "advise and consent" is: "Drop dead."

McConnell has made the issue about Obama instead about the Supreme Court and the res publica. If a

ninth justice is not chosen, the Supreme Court will go an entire term understaffed. When votes end in 4-4 ties, it will not be the Supreme Court that makes the final decision on these disputed issues affecting us all but whatever the particular appellate court had decided. The Republican establishment laments the disaffection of its members, while McConnell has doubled down on practices that republic-minded Americans of both parties rightly condemn.

"If you can keep it." Congressional approval is at 13 percent, and has been 20 percent or lower since 2011. The Republican front-runner, Donald Trump, a race baiter and bigot, is a divisive figure. Like Dwight D. Eisenhower, he has never held elective office. However, Eisenhower commanded hundreds of thousands of soldiers in battle and was well-known for his skill in managing single-minded officers like George Patton.

Trump's shenanigans threaten the Republican Party. Bernie Sanders a year ago was an obscure Vermont senator and a Democrat for only a few years. But he has received amazing support against Hillary Clinton.

Neutral political commentators explain the shocking success of these unlikely candidates as an expression of the disgust most Americans have for the anti-republic aims and actions of both major parties. Yet the term "res publica" reminds us that those other guys are not the problem, and the solution is in our asserting true republican virtues.

Martinich and Palaima are professors of philosophy and classics at the University of Texas.