

U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

Examining Irregularities in the 2020 Election

December 16, 2020

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Gary C. Peters

Mr. Chairman,

If we have learned anything over the past few years, it's that we cannot take our democracy for granted. Our institutions and democratic norms have been under assault, and when elected leaders fail to stand up and protect them, we see just how quickly they can erode.

For generations, America has been a shining example for budding democracies around the world. We have shown the world that strong governments and free societies can thrive when political power is entrusted to the people.

We have demonstrated that the will of the people is above any individual, and that when voters choose their new leaders, power can be transferred peacefully.

That's why I am frankly shocked that this committee is holding this irresponsible hearing today.

The President and many of his supporters are continuing their efforts to undermine the will of the people, disenfranchise voters, and sow the seeds of mistrust and discontent to further their partisan desire for power.

Whether intended to or not, this hearing gives a platform to conspiracy theories and lies, and it's a destructive exercise that has no place in the U.S. Senate.

Joe Biden won the election more than five weeks ago with 306 electoral votes and received the most popular votes for a presidential candidate in American history.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have certified those results. The Electoral College met Monday and all affirmed that Joe Biden will be the President on January 20, 2021.

It's a result that the majority of the American people recognize, along with the leaders of more than 150 countries around the world.

Yet even after all of that, significant numbers of Republican elected officials have been slow to publicly acknowledge that Joe Biden will be the next president of the United States.

I appreciate that yesterday several of my Republican colleagues made their first public comments acknowledging this fact. And I appreciate that even the Chairman's rhetoric around this election has evolved over the past 24 hours.

But let me be clear, deciding to move forward with this hearing today is still dangerous.

Elected leaders who were chosen by the voters to help uphold our institutions and democratic values spent weeks either turning a blind eye, or parroting provocative rhetoric and false claims about the election.

By not speaking out earlier, even though they knew it was wrong, that there was no evidence to support these claims, and that this inflammatory rhetoric is harmful to our democracy, many elected officials gave the President and his supporters license to spread damaging lies about the election.

We have known for weeks that there was no widespread voter fraud, a fact that President Trump's own Department of Justice confirmed.

There was no election interference and the election wasn't rigged. In fact, independent election security officials, and the Department of Homeland Security, have called this election "the most secure in American history." We will hear directly from the former director of CISA who will testify today that this is a fact.

In the face of intimidation from the President and his supporters, including threats of violence and even death, election officials in states across the country certified their results as accurate.

More than 50 post-election lawsuits filed by the Trump campaign have been dismissed or withdrawn, including by the U.S. Supreme Court, because there is simply no evidence to support these claims in a court of law.

And despite the title of today's hearing, there were no widespread election "irregularities" that affected the final outcome. These claims are false. And giving them more oxygen is a grave threat to the future of our democracy.

I understand the Chairman's desire to ensure our elections run smoothly, and I agree that we need to restore faith and trust in our election process.

But I am concerned today's hearing will do more harm than good by confusing a few anecdotes about human error with the insidious claims the President has aired.

Mistakes do happen in elections. But there is a difference between a clerk making an error that gets caught and corrected during routine audits, and calling the entire election fraudulent or stolen when there's no evidence, all because you didn't like the outcome.

Amplifying these obviously false narratives about fraud or irregularities, corrodes public trust, threatens our national security, and weakens our democracy and our standing around the world. Every time the President or his followers make these false claims, they destabilize our relationships with our allies, and allow our authoritarian adversaries to undercut America's democratic leadership around the globe.

Democracy, and a free society, are not guaranteed. We have seen democracies around the world crumble because of similar words and actions.

When executives abuse their power, when political leaders work to stifle the free press, and when they delegitimize the principle of one person, one vote, it puts our country on a dangerous path toward authoritarianism.

I have faith that our democracy is strong and that it can withstand these attacks. But we need all of our leaders to speak up and condemn this harmful rhetoric.

Preserving our democracy takes hard work, and I am deeply troubled that we are edging closer and closer to a crisis point.

Now is the time for American patriots who love this country to say, enough is enough.

Now is the time for patriots to put our nation's founding ideals first, during a time when American democracy needs the strongest defense we can give.