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Stabilizing Democracy:

Why individuals with extreme views should not be invited to speak at Lehigh University

Partisan tensions have always threaded the fabric of our nation's political landscape. However, years of heightened factional rhetoric, misinformation, and disinformation, have woven strands of distrust and discord that have served to push and pull people to our country's farthest corners, leaving democracy hanging in the balance. Extremist groups have exacerbated the threats already existing to the United States democracy. For over 80 years, the independent watchdog organization, Freedom House, has sought and spoken out against the threats to democracy posed by nations and regimes. The organization is "founded on the core conviction that freedom flourishes in democratic nations where governments are accountable to their people" (Freedom House 2013). It is through this core conviction that Freedom House now holds the United States justly accountable and provides recommendations to overcome the threats to our own democracy. In "Reversing the Decline of Democracy in the United States," Freedom House officials state, "to reignite the promise of US democracy and safeguard their freedoms and long-term interests, Americans must rise above partisan divisions, renew their shared commitment to fundamental democratic principles, and bolster rules and structures that maximize the common good" (Repucci 2022). This reference to Freedom House is timely given that the organization was established in 1941 when the United States, despite divisions, fought against extremist groups at home and their military abroad. It is here, as Professor Timothy Snyder reminds us, that "history does not repeat, but it does instruct" (Snyder 2017). Indeed, history tells us that the more powerful extremist groups grow within the United States, the harder it will be to overcome the partisan divides and retrieve democracy from an imperiled state. Educational institutions such as Lehigh University are essential for breathing life back into democracy. Accordingly, Lehigh should not use its platform, nor its funds, to invite extremist groups or individuals to speak to students.

To understand the threat that extremist groups pose to democracy, the term extremist must be defined and put into context. Andrej Sotlar, a criminal justice professor at the University of Maribor in Slovenia, provides a conception of extremism. Slovenia experienced the blunt wrath of power brought about by the extremist nations of Italy, Germany, and Hungary during World War II, thus making the definition even more compelling. Sotlar maintains that, "extremism is essentially a political term which determines those activities that are not morally, ideologically or politically in accordance with written (legal and constitutional) and non-written norms of the state; that are fully intolerant toward others and reject democracy as a means of governance and the way of solving problems; and finally, that reject the existing social order" (Sotlar 2004).

Moving forward, I will adhere solely to Sotlar's definition of extremism in the context of my argument. As given in the definition, an individual does not comply ideologically nor

politically with the constitution we abide by as a nation and she or he rejects the norms of the state. As extremists promulgate their views through media outlets, it would be irresponsible and negligent for Lehigh University to invite and propel such views during a time when democracy is so frail. Per Freedom House's suggestion, voters must rise above these divisions to begin to stabilize democracy within the United States. Stabilizing democracy will become increasingly more difficult if academic institutions such as Lehigh, which serves to educate the individuals attending the University, invites and provides a stage for extreme individuals to vocalize and perpetuate their views.

While democracy is in peril within the United States, there are institutions in place that the country can utilize to preserve democracy. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace developed five strategies to support the United States democracy. Within Carnegie's five strategies, experts relayed the importance of overcoming the bipartisan divide. One of the ways in which the United States can do so is, "rely on pillars of support to maintain legitimacy, such as the business community, religious leaders, the media, police, and the military. These pillars are composed of individuals with complex personal goals, identities, and needs. Movements to support democracy need to get more of these pillars to vocally join the pro-democracy side and eschew active, or more often passive, support for antidemocratic activities" (Kleinfeld 2022). Extremist individuals and groups lie outside of these pillars and articulate antidemocratic rhetoric through voice and action. Extremist views go a step beyond simply not being a part of the movement to support democracy; such views are antithetical to democracy in its entirety. The Endowment officials proceeded to caution the United States on its increasing bipartisan divide, which is only enhanced by individuals with extremist views. In addition, another warning emphasized that this level of polarization can make a state prone to becoming an authoritarian regime. Knowing the dangers that individuals with extreme views pose, it is a danger to democracy for Lehigh University to invite such individuals to speak using our platform.

To strive for a "more perfect Union" and uphold the promise of the United States Constitution, institutions must instill and drive values of democracy through education. Education is deeply embedded in a functioning democracy. Members of the American Civil Liberties Union stated that, "an open society depends on liberal education" (ACLU 2022). While universities under the First Amendment may not restrict freedom of speech, they may withhold or decide against inviting individuals who do not exemplify and present values of democracy and the United States Constitution. Inviting individuals who identify as a part of extremist groups or maintain extreme views negate the very premise of education. The assets that Lehigh University holds exist through tuition, investors, and donations to propel and create academic opportunities for future and current generations of students. These assets are used to create academic programs and to provide students with faculty and resources to enhance their education.

The influence that education holds over students has a direct correlation to the health of democracy. In 2003, John Patrick wrote the "Essential Elements of Education for Democracy," outlining the importance of education in preserving democracy. "The first essential element of a good education for democracy is a systematic and continual emphasis on teaching and learning

knowledge of democracy, democratic government, and democratic society” (Patrick 2003). By inviting an individual to speak, with what might be deemed extreme views, Lehigh University, as an institution, undermines democratic government and students’ knowledge of democracy. Patrick then states, “the second essential element of a good education for democracy is teaching and learning knowledge of the Constitution and institutions of the democratic government and civil society in which the students live” (Patrick 2003). Extremist groups and individuals do not comply politically or ideologically with the Constitution. By inviting an extremist individual, Lehigh would not be enhancing the knowledge of the Constitution for that reason. Thirdly, the “essential element in a good education for democracy is the development of the student’s propensity and capacity to apply or use knowledge to think and participate competently in a democracy” (Patrick 2003). Lehigh has the access and agency to invite an individual, not of extreme political ideologies but of tenets that encourage students to participate in democracy and do so responsibly. Again, as an institution, Lehigh University bears responsibility in modeling and preserving an ethical code to which it also belongs. Education holds weight in democracy, and Lehigh holds a strong influence over its students. It is important that Lehigh leaders acknowledge the University’s role in democracy, and the voting demographic who pays to attend the University.

Tisch College of Civic Life, under Tufts University, provided data on the demographics of voting in the 2022 midterm elections. The midterms showed that 27 percent of all youth voted in this most recent election, making it the second highest youth voter turnout in three decades. In several other states, including Pennsylvania, the voter turnout in youth was 31 percent (Tisch College). The increasing youth voter turnout has held significant weight in recent elections. Students at Lehigh University are on the younger spectrum of those within this demographic, meaning it is imperative that the students at Lehigh University are voting in a responsible manner. It is vital to democracy that these students understand the existing threats to democracy and how to combat such threats with their vote. Inviting an individual with extreme views can be dangerous to this demographic, as students continue to vote more and hold more weight within elections. It has been noted by Freedom House researchers that, “political participation has been impeded by a rise in threats against officeholders. Since leaving office, Trump and his allies have sought to marginalize and punish members of the Republican Party who seek to uphold democratic principles and refuse to go along with his narrative of a stolen election” (Repucci 2022). It is important that as an institution, Lehigh’s actions do not amount to the same result of depleting democratic principles through extreme views.

While this demographic of voters (also referred to as Gen Z) has increased its voter turnout, there is a significant amount of distrust within the United States government stemming from this group of voters. As noted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “Gen Z has the lowest level of trust of any generation and far less attachment to democracy. They need to be brought into the pro democracy space with efforts that are particular to their generation. This may entail civic education with international and historic examples of just what more can be lost and positive examples of what can be accomplished with broad-based action” (Kleinfeld 2022).

Individuals with extreme views have the potential to magnify voters' distrust with the government, further harming civic engagement and heightening the threat to democracy.

Freedom House officials illuminate the resilience of democracy, and its ability to make progress even since President Trump has left office, however, it is simultaneously emphasized that this resilience should not be taken for granted. It is essential for all Americans, students, and Lehigh University faculty, who value democracy, to uphold their allegiance to the Constitution and further combat the existing and growing polarization that exists in the United States today. Skepticism and distrust are brought about and inflamed by extremist groups within the United States, further accelerating the decline of democracy within the United States. Repucci reports that, “democracy may be resilient, but it is never static or unchallenged, and all societies must make a sustained effort to fortify their public institutions against antidemocratic assaults and the erosion of citizen trust” (Repucci 2022). Part of the challenges the United States democracy faces is the extremes shifting the political parties farther away from each other. To foster the resilience of democracy is to acknowledge the challenges facing democracy and it is important to not provide a platform for the extremes to discuss antidemocratic agendas. Lehigh University should not be using its funds or platform to invite extremist individuals regardless of their self-proclaimed political affiliations.

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