

We Are Part of the System

American government has never been populated by angels.

Watergate produced convictions and prison sentences. The Reagan years brought Iran-Contra and other corruption investigations. The Clinton years brought Whitewater and convictions among people in the president's political orbit. Other administrations have had scandals of their own. More recently, we have watched investigations, indictments, convictions, pardons, contested elections, challenges to institutions, and arguments over the proper use of presidential power.

The circumstances change. The seriousness varies. But the lesson stays the same: no party has a monopoly on virtue, and power doesn't become safe simply because the people we trust are the ones exercising it.

The people who designed our constitutional system understood this. James Madison put it memorably in Federalist No. 51:

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

The Constitution was not designed on the assumption that we would always choose wise, honorable, self-restrained leaders. It divided power precisely because human beings are ambitious, partisan, self-interested, loyal, fearful, occasionally corrupt — and sometimes simply wrong.

Congress checks the president. Courts check both. Elections allow the public to replace those in power. Federal and state governments divide authority. Laws establish boundaries. Norms and traditions fill spaces the written rules cannot anticipate.

Madison called these protections the "auxiliary precautions." But he identified another safeguard first: *"A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government."*

That's us.

The Constitution Has Brakes. It Also Needs a Rudder.

Checks and balances can restrain power, but they can't tell us what the power is for. For that, we can look a few lines above the Constitution's machinery, to its opening statement of purpose: we the people established this government in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and those who follow.

That's not a policy platform. It doesn't tell us the proper tax rate, settle immigration policy, or determine how much government should spend. We still have to argue about all of that. But it gives those arguments a direction — a rudder, not a rulebook.

That question — what are we trying to accomplish — can easily disappear in an election season. Candidates compete, parties attack, headlines simplify, and every controversy becomes evidence that one side is good and the other dangerous. We begin asking "did our side win?" when perhaps we should sometimes be asking whether we're still heading in the right direction at all.

When the Oath Gets Difficult

Our history also contains people who remind us what constitutional stewardship looks like.

During Watergate, Attorney General Elliot Richardson was ordered by President Nixon to fire special prosecutor Archibald Cox. Richardson refused and resigned. Decades later, Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger faced pressure from President Trump to alter an election outcome. He refused. More recently still, Senator Bob Menendez was called on to resign by dozens of his own Democratic colleagues — including his home state's other senator and his party's Senate leadership — well before his corruption trial concluded. His own party drew the line first.

Their policy positions are beside the point. What matters is that each encountered a boundary between loyalty to a political leader or party and responsibility to something larger — and the oath mattered most exactly when keeping it became inconvenient.

There have been others: Republicans, Democrats, judges, prosecutors, legislators, election officials, military officers, civil servants, and ordinary citizens. Sometimes the constitutional guardrail is a clause written on parchment. Sometimes it's a person saying no.

Elections Choose Stewards

That gives us another way to think about elections. We aren't simply selecting people whose positions most closely resemble our own — we're temporarily entrusting people with power.

So alongside the usual questions about taxes, immigration, health care, education, abortion, guns, regulation, and foreign policy, it's worth asking some more basic ones. Does this person understand what the power is for? Do they recognize limits on their own authority? Will they respect an election they lose? Will they defend an institution when doing so disadvantages their own party? Can they work with people they strongly disagree with? Do they understand an oath as an obligation rather than a ceremony? And perhaps most importantly: do they see themselves as owners of power, or temporary stewards of it?

None of these questions tells us which party to vote for. They give us something to measure whoever's asking for our vote against.

The Primary Control

It would be comforting to believe that better laws could solve this entirely. They can't.

We should strengthen safeguards when experience exposes weaknesses. Laws should be enforced. Genuine wrongdoing should be investigated. Crimes should be prosecuted according to evidence and law, regardless of party. But eventually every constitutional protection reaches a human being. A president must respect a limit. A member of Congress must exercise independent judgment. A prosecutor must follow evidence rather than politics. A judge must apply the law. An election official must count the votes. And citizens must decide what behavior they will reward.

That last responsibility belongs to us.

The Constitution anticipated imperfect leaders. Its structure attempts to constrain them. Its mission gives them direction. And every election returns the question to the opening words: we the people.

Thinking carefully before we vote will not guarantee good government. But Madison reminded us why it matters.

We are not merely spectators of the constitutional system.

We are part of it.