*Free, fair elections in Wisconsin? Count on it*

All those folks – millions of them, we’re often told – who believe elections are being stolen in America should experience what I did a few days ago.

Full disclosure: I don’t believe those claims. And not just because counts and recounts confirmed the numbers, or that court after court across the country tossed cases because there was no meaningful evidence of cheating. Here’s why I didn’t believe it. I’ve been involved in covering elections for half a century. I’ve known dozens of people, from liberals to conservatives and in-between, who were paid to administer elections. They did so impartially, with fairness and integrity. The idea of a nationwide election scam, pulling a fast one on people like that, is laughably uninformed.

Now, back to my recent experience.

I was asked by two friends and colleagues – George Stanley, recently retired editor of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and this year’s president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, and Beth Bennett, the WNA’s executive director – to fill a media slot on an Advisory Committee to the Wisconsin Elections Commission. The committee was formed to help the WEC update rules governing observers at polling places.

Full disclosure, again: My (unpaid) role was strictly to represent the state’s newspapers. Not the elections commission or any other organization. There was one other media representative, Sean Dwyer, a longtime television newsman, there on behalf of Wisconsin broadcasters. Our role was limited, to provide input related to how media members should interact with election officials and others at polling places. Our two spots were added after the committee’s first meeting, because questions had been raised about the media’s role.

The real pros were a couple of dozen committee members representing critical interests. As one might expect there were experienced observers linked to the Democratic and Republican parties. Others were also represented, such as the Libertarian Party. Public-interest organizations such as the League of Women Voters and Common Cause were on the committee. And so were multiple representatives of local governments, small and large, involved with running elections. Altogether, more than two dozen people were on the Zoom call.

Pardon a brief sidestep: Zoom meetings suck. And this one was seven hours long. Worshiping technology may be the religion of the day, but it’s less effective than dealing with people in person and it takes longer to switch back and forth between speakers (especially when some inevitably forget to unmute).

Here’s the overall take, though. These were good people, all. They knew their stuff. Whether it was the local elections officials or the experienced observers or the special-interest representatives, they knew voting procedures inside and out. The detail was amazing, figuring out how to provide maximum opportunity for monitoring to make sure laws and procedures are meticulously followed. No topic was off the table. No consideration too small or trivial. Every line, every word in the draft rules proposal, thoroughly scrutinized. The universal objective clearly was to make sure citizens could trust the vote.

The discussion was respectful. Yes, even though some of those on the meeting were partisan representatives who likely held broad disagreements about many things. Participants were passionate about their experiences and recommendations – as they should have been – but never crossed a line into angry or vitriolic discourse. Instead, they listened to each other and for the most part pointed the way toward common sense solutions.

Just my thought, but it seems hard to come away from that kind of experience clinging to a belief in some nationwide election conspiracy. An ongoing conspiracy, by the way, because there are still more recent losing candidates (Kari Lake in Arizona, for example) insisting they won.

Here in Wisconsin – and, I assume, in other American states – there are legions of people just like the folks involved in this meeting, doing their absolute best to give voters a free, fair election experience. Not perfect, perhaps – anytime people are involved, errors happen – but as honest as good people can make it. Trust is fragile, though, and risks being seriously undermined when high-profile operatives continue to make claims they can’t back up with facts or evidence.

A special pat on the back goes to WEC staff attorney Brandon Hunzicker, who ran the Zoom call with an even hand and astonishing patience. If Hunzicker had a view on politics no one could have known. No matter how long the meeting dragged on, or how out in the weeds any speaker roamed, Hunzicker remained the picture of patience and accommodation. Cheers.

Readers, if you’re tempted to blast away at elections officials or those who spend long hours at polls monitoring as observers, give these good folks a break. They are pillars and defenders of democracy.

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