**Law Day: Voices of Democracy in Times of Change**

By Dean R. Dietrich, president, State Bar of Wisconsin

“Voices of Democracy” is the American Bar Association’s theme for Law Day (May 1, 2024). This year, the theme encourages Americans to participate in the 2024 elections by deepening their understanding of the electoral process; discussing issues in honest and civil ways; turning out to vote; and, finally, helping to move the country forward after free and fair elections. In this way, Americans ensure that our government remains responsive to the wishes of the people.

**We Are at a Crossroads**

Today, we are faced with many questions about the importance of a democratic system of governance. Some suggest that a democratic form of government has lost its effectiveness. According to a PEW Research Center study from spring 2022, more Americans are dissatisfied with democracy and political efficacy (62%) than satisfied (32%). The U.S. ranks 16 out of 19 countries for satisfaction.

Others suggest that our country is at a crossroads over how to govern ourselves. Another PEW Research Center study from March 2023 shows conflicting calls for change. For example, some people want to make it easier to vote by automatic registration, offer mail-in voting, and making Election Day a holiday. Others believe the U.S. should go to paper ballots, mail-in voting should be eliminated, and independent fact-checkers should be implemented for ballot initiatives, to name a few.

**The Importance of Civility**

There is a troubling erosion of democracy in the U.S., fueled by political polarization. For democracy in the U.S. to work, it’s imperative that we exercise civility. Civility is the art of engaging in constructive dialogue, treating others with respect, listening attentively to opposing viewpoints, and seeking common ground for the greater good.

I am concerned that people are beginning to tune out from politics and rely only on social media ads and TV soundbites from opposing political parties. Much of the language in political campaigns is inflammatory. Misstatements and half-truths have become the norm. With civics education, we learn how government functions, the electoral process, and deciphering political messaging. A strong civics education helps us better understand democracy.

**Democracy in Action**

Democracy, with its emphasis on the rule of law, and citizen participation, serves as the bedrock of our society. It offers a framework for peaceful resolution of conflicts, protects individual liberties, and ensures accountability of those in power. We must hold democracy dear. It is not static; it requires constant nurturing and safeguarding.

During 2024, the United States will be holding its 60th Presidential election and celebrating our history of the public’s participation in government and the future of our country. The ability of citizens to express their opinion in a civil and respectful way and decide who should lead our country is a cornerstone of democracy in action.