We need a campaign for election ethics

The events yesterday obviously have deeper roots than in a misunderstanding of elections, but the failure to appreciate how an election works is a significant contributing factor. Yet the last 10 years of work in democractic organisations has given me the insight that we have almost no broad understanding of what an election is or how it should work.

The lack of shared understanding of how elections work leaves them open to attack from people who don't get the outcome they want from any given election. As we've seen very vividly over the past day!

The US election points to the need for a much better shared understanding of who should vote, how they should vote, what is appropriate in an election campaign and how elections work.

The bizarre sight of Donald Trump rambling about how the election was rigged was pathetic at first, and has turned into something dangerous. But it also points to the need for a campaign to set public expectations. The argument from Trump is that because Trump was ahead on election night, and then was caught as mail-in votes were counted that this is an election being ‘rigged' or 'stolen'.

The irony of Republicans complaining that an election is rigged when a fundamental aspect of their party’s approach to elections has been to suppress turnout is not lost on many of us. And the fact that Republicans engineered the situation where mail-in ballots are being counted after on-the-day ballots makes this irony all the more piquant.

Elections are important in any democracy. I think that we need to have fewer high-stakes elections in which the winner takes all. But more power for communities will need more elections, so the importance may even become greater.

The first thing we need to do is to rehabilitate elections as a way of deciding how we are governed. A significant part of the problem we have is that people think elections are a bad thing, and something that bad people participate in. Politics exists to give us a way to answer questions we can’t agree on. It is an approach to conflict resolution. But too often we get into a vicious circle where elections are assumed to be divisive, leaving the electoral realm to people (like Trump) who enjoy creating division.

I don’t believe that it is inevitable that elections are a subject where we can’t achieve a consensus on who should vote, how they should vote and what counts as unfair practice.
One of our biggest problems is that the consumer culture we live in creates an expectation that we will get what we opted for. In market choices that might be the case. But collective decisions require us to understand that sometimes we don’t get what we want. That is really difficult and seems to be an important element of contemporary dissatisfaction with politics. We need to find ways to respect collective decisions even where we’ve lost.

If I were in the US I’d be seeking a Constitutional Amendment that ensures (among other things):

1. All adult citizens should have the right to vote

2. All voters should have equal access to voting, there should be no curtailment of access to voting by restriction of polling places or access to postal or other secure remote voting

3. Voting should be reflected in election outcomes, so not mediated through an electoral college or diminished through gerrymandering or other electoral manipulation

4. The aim of elections should be to maximise participation.

5. Voter suppression should be made illegal.

6. Political parties should be properly constituted, state funded and prevented from taking corporate donations

7. Electoral administration should be done by non-partisan individuals, regulated at arms length from Government

That’s a start - and I realise banning corporate donations may be difficult to win, but there needs to be a focus on how elections could be better.

Much of it applies to elections in the UK, and we can create a common campaign for better election practice that thrives in both countries and beyond.

We need to create a society-wide understanding of what a good election looks like. We need people to understand that mail-in ballots being counted after in-person votes may mean changes to the running totals. We need people to accept good campaigning and the need for elections. We also need to learn how to deal with losing, and use this as a way to improve our electoral performance.

Continued allegations of election rigging, fraud or elections being stolen only serve to undermine our democracy. Sometimes we need to call these things out where they’ve actually happened. But we also need to create better understanding of what is and what isn’t acceptable in our elections.