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Emotion and Education: The Origins of Mob Rule and Our Response

MOB STORMS THE CAPITAL So read the headline of *The Wallstreet Journal* on July 7, 2021. For many Americans, this was a wakeup call to the dangers of mob rule. In his article, “America is Living James Madison’s Nightmare,” Jeffrey Rosen links mob rule to the allure of populism which leads to the “formation of impetuous majorities.” People fall victim to populism when they are led by emotion rather than reason. Populism can take root where there is a lack of good education and habits of reason.

What is at stake? Democracy. In his *Lyceum Address* of January 1838, Lincoln warns that the undoing of our nation will most likely come from within. He cites instances of how mobs disregarded the laws. He argued that people need the government to protect their person and property and if the government fails to do so, the people will no longer protect their government. Lincoln calls for citizens to be vigilant in the following of laws and the protection of civic institutions.

The founding fathers sought to prevent mob rule through a form of government that cools populism. Though the House of Representatives was elected directly by the people, the Senate was elected by state legislatures. The president was also elected indirectly. This provided, according to *The Federalist Papers: No. 63*, “a safeguard against the tyranny of [the people’s] own passions.” But now Senate and presidential candidates pander directly to the people’s tyrannical passions. Madison thought that the geographical dispersion of people would slow the spread of populist notions, but this has been undermined by the evolution of mass media. The

internet and social media have intensified this crisis through the instantaneous and targeted circulation of information fueled by sensationalism rather than logic.

So, what can be done? Though it is too late to rein in the direct appeal of senatorial and presidential candidates to the populus, Rosen points to the “top two” primary system, which might lead to the selection of more “reason”-able candidates. With regard to social media and the speed of populist appeal, one option would be to censor mob-inciting material. But any undermining of the First Amendment would also be a threat to our democratic institutions. Both Madison and Lincoln stressed the importance of civic education, which would encourage reverence for our constitution, our laws, and our democracy. The need for this has not diminished.

Madison and Lincoln charted a course that would enable the preservation of our democracy and the institutions that support it. While our democracy was established through a passionate revolution, it will be preserved by measured reason. There is a place for passion and emotion. As William Wilberforce wrote in *Real Christianity*, “When emotion is a response to truth or to a clear comprehension of the nature of God and His goodness to us, then emotion is valuable and appropriate.” But untethered from truth, passion and emotion will undermine our democracy. The mob insurrection on January 6 demonstrates how this can happen.