

PROTECT DEMOCRACY 2020

A Presidential Blueprint for Protecting our Democracy

American democracy aspires to the ideals of liberty, freedom, and justice. People across America cherish these ideals and are united in seeking to protect them. While Americans may differ on questions of policy, our founding principle of a government of and by the people is not up for debate. America must — and can — live up to the promise of its foundational ideals. **Yet, American democracy is under threat. It has been for some time.**

Our system of checks and balances is not functioning. Our elections are under-representative, are under-resourced, and exclude too many people. Participation in — and passion for — the civic square is waning.

While the current administration's actions aggravate the fault lines in our democracy, the problems facing our democracy have been metastasizing for years, with abuses by both Democratic and Republican administrations. They will also outlive the current administration if we do not address them head on.

Americans are growing increasingly aware of the challenges facing our democracy and concerned that our democracy is eroding. Americans see executive power grabs, foreign interference in our elections, long lines at the polls, attacks on the press and dissenters — and know something is wrong.

- ★ 68% of Americans say democracy in the United States is “getting weaker.”
- ★ 50% of Americans think the US is in “danger of becoming a non-democratic, authoritarian country.”
- ★ The United States ranks 26th out of 32 developed countries in voter turnout.
- ★ 2018 marked the 8th consecutive year of decline for the United States' Freedom House score.

Americans are right to be worried. Attacks on our democratic institutions reflect a new kind of threat to our representative government. If the executive branch continues to erode long-standing norms that underpin our democracy, it will further weaken our system of checks and balances and put true self-government out of reach.

Together, we can fix it. Protect Democracy is a nonpartisan nonprofit with an urgent mission: to prevent our democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government. Since Protect Democracy's creation two years ago, our cross-partisan team has taken over four dozen actions, including:

- ★ Exposing that a DOJ and DHS report on the national origin of terrorists, compiled and released in conjunction with the so-called “Travel Ban,” was misleading and full of errors;
- ★ Forcing Brian Kemp to resign as Secretary of State so that he couldn't oversee the vote count in Georgia's gubernatorial race in which he was a candidate; and
- ★ Helping to shut down the Pence-Kobach Commission, a thinly-veiled effort at voter suppression.

Congress enacted significant reforms after President Nixon left office. We are preparing for a new set of needed reforms after the current President leaves office. These reforms focus on preventing the corruption of elections; preventing executive power grabs; preventing the politicization of independent institutions; preventing the spread of disinformation; preventing the quashing of dissent; and preventing the delegitimization of communities. More than forty years after Nixon, American democracy once again needs renewal.

Presidential candidates must commit to renewing our democracy.

The next President will have the unique opportunity and responsibility to reset the tone, unite Americans, and implement reforms to strengthen our democracy for all Americans.

Every candidate for President — Republican, Democratic, and Independent — must present a policy platform to voters that protects and strengthens our democracy.

The Democracy Platform 2020 is a model policy platform designed to shore up our institutions and protect our governing standards. It offers common-sense democracy reforms and commitments for presidential candidates to consider and build upon. This package is just a starting point. Many candidates have already proposed bold ideas and we applaud all efforts to expand on the platform with ambitious, aspirational ideas grounded in America's core democratic principles. The Platform has three planks:

- I. **Restoring Checks and Balances.** Our system of checks and balances protects a democratic form of government that serves the people, and does not allow any one person to accrue too much power or place himself or herself above the law. *The next President must restore the balance between the branches and demonstrate that the President is not above the law.*
- II. **Ensuring Free, Fair, and Accessible Elections.** Vibrant, active, and equal participation in elections is essential to a healthy democracy so that citizens can choose their representatives. *The next President must protect our elections and expand voting access.*
- III. **Protecting Civic Discourse and Marginalized Communities.** Effective democracies are built upon a discourse which values facts, and does not seek to divide and demonize certain communities. *The next President must commit to government transparency and accountability, with protections for the press, dissent, open debate, and minority communities.*

We urge all candidates for President to adopt and expand upon Democracy Platform 2020 and present plans to voters to renew our democracy. Our democracy depends on it.

American democracy is on the ballot in 2020.

I. Restoring Checks and Balances

The Constitution establishes checks and balances to make sure that power is spread across the government and that no person or branch can exercise complete control over other branches. In a healthy democracy, this means that the President faithfully executes the constitution to support democratic values, and that no one is above the law.

The Problem: In recent decades, our system has become imbalanced — the Executive has amassed disproportionate power, Congress is too willing to cede power to the President, and the courts' independence is under attack due to attacks from the President and a politicized judicial nomination process.

Solutions

- **Prevent Political Interference in Applying the Law** — The President must commit to support equal application of the law and guarantee the independence of the Department of Justice, FBI, and other law enforcement agencies. The President should prevent improper White House interference and involvement in specific law enforcement matters and report to Congress and the public on contacts between the White House and agencies in specific cases.
- **Restore Congress's Role in Decisions of War** — To go to war, the President must make a transparent case to the public and get Congress's approval. This means providing the legal reasons for using military force and consulting with and seeking approval from Congress before proactively launching new conflicts.
- **Use Emergency Powers Responsibly** — The President must not invoke emergency powers for dubious or improper purposes and must respect Congress's authority as a coequal branch. He or she should amend the National Emergency Act to clarify that it doesn't supercede Congressional spending authority.
- **Appoint and Confirm Qualified Officials** — The President must respect the Constitution by seeking and obtaining Senate approval for nominees to high offices. The President should not appoint family members to key positions and should select people for their excellence and experience.
- **End Conflicts of Interest** — The President and Vice President must demonstrate that their decisions are made in the public's interest, not their own. This includes: disclosing tax returns, not accepting profits from domestic and foreign business interests, and following conflict-of-interest rules.
- **Respect the Pardon Process** — The President should create structures to ensure that pardons serve the purpose of relief from unjust sentences. The President must never dangle or issue pardons that put himself or herself — or those who might implicate him or her — above the law.
- **Protect the Civil Service** — The President must protect the independence of civil servants, and not intimidate, discriminate, or retaliate against them based on political affiliation or work in prior administrations.
- **De-Politicize the Security Clearance Process** — The President must ensure that the security clearance process is used for national security purposes, not to exercise political favor or retribution.
- **Respect Court Orders** — The President must protect the independence of the judiciary. The President should commit to ensuring that executive branch officials comply with court orders.

II. Ensuring Free, Fair, and Accessible Elections

Free, fair, and accessible elections form the cornerstone of democracy, allowing citizens to exercise their most basic political right: to choose who governs them. All eligible voters should be able to exercise their civic duty with ease. In a democracy, the people are the best constraint on the abuse of power.

The Problem: Our democracy is threatened by voter suppression, deficient election infrastructure, and foreign and domestic interference. In recent years, there has been a renewed strategy to systematically disenfranchise certain groups of voters — including through intimidation, improper/illegal roll purges, and bureaucratic hurdles based on race, age, and other demographic factors. When Americans do vote, they often face long lines at the polls, confusing rules, and faulty/insecure election machinery.

Solutions

- **Ensure Unbiased Elections** — The President must prevent government officials from interfering with campaigns or inappropriately intervening in the administration of elections. The President must also support reforms to protect voter rolls from improper purges.
- **Ensure a Non-Politicized Census that Counts All Persons** — The decennial census must be non-partisan and non-politicized, as it determines who the government counts as an American. The President must support measures to protect the independence of the census and should prohibit political interference in the development of census questions.
- **Support Reauthorization of Voting Rights Act** — The President must support the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act to make sure that no one is prevented from voting on the basis of race.
- **Expand Access to Voting** — The President must support reforms to expand access to the ballot, including (but not limited to): automatic voter registration, the expansion of early voting, same day registration, making election day a national holiday or a weekend, and the restoration of voting rights to formerly incarcerated citizens.
- **End Partisan Gerrymandering** — The President must support reforms to ensure voters choose their elected officials — not the other way around. By removing partisanship from the drawing of legislative districts and encouraging transparency and public participation, we can better ensure the rights of racial, ethnic, and other marginalized communities are reflected and respected.
- **Reduce Corruption in Funding of Campaigns** — The President should support transparency rules to help reduce corruption and increase accountability in political campaigns.
- **Secure Elections from Domestic and Foreign Interference** — The President must commit to hardening election machinery and protecting campaigns against attacks from foreign or domestic actors by increasing funding and setting federal standards.

III. Protecting Civic Discourse and Marginalized Communities

The First Amendment protects freedom of expression and dissent, based on opinion, religion, or other factors. The Fourteenth Amendment declares that all Americans are equal in the eyes of the law. The United States has a sometimes ugly, tragic, and flawed history of living up to its founding principles in protecting the rights of all Americans. America must live up to that promise. A functioning democracy must embrace the voices of all Americans – regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity – in a public discourse rooted in a free press, tolerance, and respect for transparency, facts and scientific inquiry.

The Problem: The free press, a foundation of our democracy, has been under ongoing, relentless attack from political forces. Official power has been used to threaten and punish critics, in many cases marginalizing and dehumanizing minority or disadvantaged communities. This has led to the rise and emboldening of militant hate groups. Online disinformation campaigns and fake accounts on social media spread false and misleading news to divide Americans. Presidential candidates who have committed to transparency and a free press have, when in office, shielded information about the government from Congress, the press, and the public.

Solutions

- **Protect Civil Rights and Liberties** — The President must use the authority of his or her office to represent the entire nation, both in action and rhetoric. This includes protecting the civil rights and liberties of all Americans, across all demographics. Law and immigration enforcement agencies must be de-politicized; they must treat all marginalized groups with dignity and respect.
- **Protect the Press** — The free press acts as a watchdog of our democracy and makes sure government officials are held accountable and responsive. The President must protect the press and prevent the use of government as a weapon against the press. The President must never intervene in regulatory, antitrust, or contract decisions based on their view of the media's coverage of his or her administration. The administration must provide fair and open access to government data, records, and events.
- **Protect Political Dissenters** — Free speech and the right to protest are protected. The President must ensure that government resources are never used against political dissenters. Federal officials must not coerce private employers from stifling the political speech of their employees. The administration must never make decisions about regulation, enforcement matters, grants, or contracts based on political views or speech. Lawful and peaceful protest must be protected, and the President should enforce the law against violent acts that impede it.
- **Ensure the Administration is Truthful** — The President must commit to preventing the government from spreading disinformation. Government data should be accurate and non-partisan. If the government inadvertently releases inaccurate or misleading information, it must retract it.
- **Ensure Stronger Privacy Protections Online** — In order to protect Americans from nefarious foreign and domestic actors that seek to reduce American participation in our democracy, the President should support efforts to strengthen digital privacy rights so that Americans have more control over their data and digital footprint.
- **Support Legislation to Promote Transparency on Social Media** — The President should support legislation like the Honest Ads Act, which would subject social media companies to campaign ad disclosure requirements.