

Compact for the American Future*Fighting Corruption and Strengthening America's Democracy*

The foundation of America's promise is its democracy. An imperfect but virtuous set of laws, norms and values, Americans fundamentally believe that the government should be of, by and for the people. But in practice, we have fallen short.

Critically, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that corruption in our government can get in the way of an effective and equitable national response. As Americans are left to struggle without additional economic relief, we are reminded of the corruption that plagued the first round of stimulus – from PPP loans to friends of the administration to no-bid contracts and the most powerful getting ahead. And long before the public health crisis, corruption and threats to democracy have taken hold of our system, from the federal government on down.

Americans are ready for a government that works for the people. Future Majority polling has found that an overwhelming majority of voters approve of comprehensive anti-corruption legislation. Similar substantial majorities are concerned with corruption influencing decisions made in Washington, D.C. There is a broad mandate to solve corruption issues and in turn build a better future for all Americans.

In the final installment of the **Compact for the American Future**, *Fighting Corruption and Strengthening America's Democracy*, we'll discuss promising solutions to rebuild our democracy and make our government work for everyone.

Pandemic Preparedness and Response

There have been many failures to the United States federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic – from insufficient strategic stockpiles, to breakdowns in supply chains, to misinformation and disinformation coming from the very top of the government. What cannot be overlooked is how corruption has thwarted our government's response and hobbled it, often leaving hardworking Americans struggling to make ends meet while small businesses are left to suffer. We must make sure that guardrails are up before the next pandemic or unforeseen crisis in order to protect against corruption, self-dealing and abuse of power. Here is where we can start:

- There have been major gaps in oversight of Congressionally appropriated COVID-19 economic aid. Some due to incompetence, and some due to corrupt intent. In future crises, a completely **independent commission should be established and empowered** to prevent and root out corruption in the selection of recipients and deployment of taxpayer dollars.
- A pandemic, like COVID-19, can be a national security risk. The next President must **restore the pandemic response team at the National Security Council** to prevent any undue corruption or national security risks on the part of foreign adversaries.

- Over a quarter of contracts signed in the early efforts of the U.S. government response to COVID-19 were done without competitive bidding. Congress and state legislatures must ensure that **proper bidding process for contracts** – one without any real or apparent conflicts of interest with any federal or state officials.
- State and federal unemployment programs have been rife with fraud and abuse. Strong **protections must be put in place to prevent and hold accountable any bad actors that fraudulently access unemployment funds** and take away from those out of work and who qualify.
- The **Office of the Inspector General should be heavily involved in future national task forces** set up to respond to a pandemic so anti-corruption is at the forefront of our national response.
- Inspectors general must be allowed to conduct their work without undue influence and interference. Congress must establish **stronger limits for the president around firing inspectors general** and those limits should be enforced.
- Congress, the independent commission and the team at the National Security Council should **each identify and make public potential corruption risks** within and outside of the federal government as part of their situational analyses – and they should follow up with recommendations to stop these corruption risks before they start.
- The Paycheck Protection Program to date has been riddled with inequities and disparities. Congress must ensure that **federally appropriated funds for small businesses to not discriminate against business owners due to their race, ethnicity, gender or geography.**
- **Federal agencies as well as leaders and activists that deal with gender parity, diversity, equity and inclusion, people with disabilities and other marginalized groups** must have a seat at the table in the national task force. This is important not only for ensuring equitable outcomes and mitigating unintended consequences of large government programs but also for corruption control.
- The government should prioritize **rapid and complete disclosure** so oversight bodies can identify trends that could impact priorities to accelerate an economic recovery and ensure that dollars are getting out to the right people without delay and with the desired impact.
- Rapid and complete **disclosure with transparent communication to the public** can also help other agencies uncover systemic fraud, waste and abuse in the disbursement of federal funds.
- **Public engagement and participation** should be a key component of a national pandemic response. Doing so will help ensure lawmakers are responding to the public's needs and that policies are responsive, not discriminatory and ethical. Further, by engaging the public from the outset, the government can solidify public trust, making the public more likely to comply with local and national restrictions to combat a pandemic.
- Preparation is often the best remedy against corruption. The U.S. and state government must **adhere to and regularly update comprehensive pandemic or other emergency response plans** using best practices and those plans should be developed with attention to corruption risks.

- Congress must affirm and **strengthen whistleblower protections** so those operating in the federal government are protected from retaliation and feel empowered to come forward with corruption in a pandemic response. There must be clear and accessible mechanisms for whistleblowers to make claims.
- The U.S. must engage in **ongoing monitoring, evaluation and auditing** of the deployment of taxpayer dollars for pandemic economic relief. These should be balanced with the need to distribute funds quickly and the risks that without oversight measures there is a high likelihood of fraud and corruption. Reporting mechanisms must be put into place as well.
- Finally, the entire ethos of federal and state leaders who are the face of the government's response to a pandemic should be one of **transparency, integrity and accountability**.

Safeguarding the Right to Vote

There is no more important act one can take in America's democracy than exercising the right to vote. It is a right that has been routinely and systematically undermined by lawmakers and special interests who believe they benefit from fewer Americans voting – not more. This has been largely targeted at Black Americans, young voters, and other voters of color. The rigged system further dampens the vote as Americans do not trust their elected officials are working for them and are skeptical that their vote – in face of all of the obstacles – will make a difference. But protecting the right to vote can restore the public's trust in our government and make our democracy work for everyone, as it was intended. Here's where we can start:

- In recent years, the Supreme Court has gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It is imperative that Congress and the next president make it a priority to **pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Act** to restore and build upon this landmark pro-democracy legislation.
- We must **pass and enact into law H.R. 1 For the People Act of 2019** to increase voting access, reduce the influence of money and politics, and reform government ethics so our government works for the people. Several key voting provisions should be codified and expanding upon, including the following:
 - **Automatic voter registration** through coordination with various agencies and with the most up-to-date technology to streamline the process and reduce costs.
 - **Same day voter registration** to allow Americans to register and vote on the same day, making it easier for Americans to participate in our democracy.
 - **Early voting** should be the practice in every state – without excuses – and for a duration of at least two weeks before Election Day. Early voting should provide equal ballot access as on Election Day through adequate polling locations.
 - More than five million Americans are currently denied their right to vote after serving their sentences because many state laws disenfranchise voters permanently. It is long overdue that the United States **restores voting rights** to the millions of Americans who have served their time.

- Every American voter should have the option to vote from home by the mail. This means expanding **vote-by-mail**, eliminating barriers to do so, and ensuring that adequate drop boxes are available for voters to drop off their ballots in addition to the option to send them through the mail.
- Americans should be able to **pre-register for the next election in which they are eligible to vote at 16 and 17 years old**. This helps more young people engage in the democratic process which increases their likelihood of engaging during their lifetimes. Automatic voter registration systems would capture young voters at 16 or 17 based on state law.
- We must finally ensure every state engages in redistricting reform, so voters choose their elected officials, not the other way around. **Independent redistricting commissions** are a proven model in several states that produce fair legislative maps and prevents political and racial gerrymandering.
- The federal government should declare **Election Day a national holiday** so millions more workers get time off to vote on Election Day, in concert with expanded early voting and greater vote by mail opportunities.
- Congress must ensure **that employees are not retaliated against and have the freedom to take time off work to vote** in any local, state and federal elections.
- As Congress and the states expand vote-by-mail opportunities, the federal government must **fully fund, protect and modernize the United States Postal Service**. The next administration must reverse the operational changes made under the current administration that have slowed delivery times and put postal workers' jobs at risk.
- State legislatures decide when ballots delivered by the mail no longer are valid. As vote-by-mail expands, states should update their laws to count ballots that are **postmarked on or by Election Day and give a grace period in the days after** for ballots to arrive at their local election offices so long as they are postmarked by Election Day.
- Voter roll purges have disenfranchised voters by the tens of thousands – and they predominantly impact Black voters, other voters of color and young voters. Congress must **set limits on states' ability to purge voter rolls** outside of voter requests and legitimate reasons for removal (including death, change of address, etc.).
- The U.S. should move toward an **entire paper ballot system**, as electronic voting machines are vulnerable to hacking, fraud and technical issues, while paper ballots are more secure, less susceptible to fraud and provide a paper trail that allow voters the opportunity attest to any discrepancies in signatures.
- States should have **timely and accurate mail ballot tracking systems** – similar to systems delivery companies use – so voters can track their ballot and be assured their vote is counted.

- Poll workers have increasingly been in short supply, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened this challenge. **There are several steps state governments and the federal government can take to recruit more poll workers**, including adequately paying them for their time, recruiting more young poll workers by offering child care services, working with the business community and government agencies to source workers trained in similar practices, and eliminating service requirements that are a high barrier to entry to work at polls.
- Congress and state governments should make concerted efforts to **recruit more poll workers that speak languages that represent their communities** as well as BIPOC individuals and persons with disabilities – so every voter feels safe and feels that their voices are represented.
- Regulators and law enforcement should be **empowered to enforce the law that criminalizes voter intimidation at the polls**. Campaigns and outside groups that encourage voter intimidation designed to dampen the vote must be held accountable.
- After three decades, a consent decree that limited the Republican National Committee's ability to challenge voters' qualifications was lifted. Congress must step in to **prevent voter suppression tactics** by outlawing direct attempts to discourage Americans from voting, especially through racial targeting.
- The U.S. president must **forcefully stand up against foreign interference** in American elections, including through economic sanctions and other penalties that will deter bad actors from denying Americans' free and fair elections.
- Congress must make **significant investments to beef up election security**, including appropriations to states for administrative costs in line with recommendations to make elections more secure at all levels.
- Finally, **voting information must be made widely accessible**, easy to follow, distributed in different languages, and posted online without complexity that often creates a barrier to vote. State election officials can make major investments to streamline and modernize their voter information portals online.

Getting Money out of Politics

In American politics, lax campaign finance laws have allowed big corporate special interests to have an outsized impact on our elections, effectively drowning the voice of regular voters. Americans deserve a government in which their elected leaders work for them – not a narrow band of special interests that have elected officials bought and paid for to enact their desired policy outcomes. By getting money out of politics, we can strengthen our democracy and make our government work for the people.

- We must **pass and enact into law H.R. 1 For the People Act of 2019** to reduce the influence of money in politics and give every American the freedom and a fair shot to make their voices heard in our democracy.
- Voters deserve to know who is spending money in elections in order to make informed decisions. Congress must ensure **real-time disclosure** and information must be conveniently posted on easy-to-read online portals.

- States can ensure that companies that spend electoral money must have **approval by shareholders** and the amount and recipients of their contributions are disclosed.
- Every state should meet the federal level requirements that **corporate contributions cannot be made to candidate committees**. Allowing corporations to do so and impose undue influence on state lawmakers.
- Similarly, **corporate political action committees (PACs) should be barred from making contributions to candidates**.
- In addition to easily accessible public portals, outlets (whether digital or otherwise) that run political advertisements must be required to **publicly track and post those purchase requests**.
- Congress and state legislatures can **implement public financing of elections through small dollar match programs**. This reduces financial barriers to get involved in politics and makes it easier for all candidates to run for office, no matter their personal net worth.
- We must **reform presidential inaugural committees** so Americans are aware of who gave to those committees and what potential or actual conflicts of interest there might be in a new administration. Congress must exercise its full oversight authority to prevent corruption or undue influence from big donors.
- Congress **must close loopholes in federal regulations that allow foreign-owned or foreign-funded companies to spend money** in American elections
- Registered **lobbyists must be banned from donating and fundraising for candidates**, especially those that they lobby on legislative matters.
- We must take a close look at **online and digital advertising and regulate these platforms like we do for cable and radio advertising**. It should not be up to the large technology companies to self-regulate political advertising – especially when social media can breed dangerous misinformation and disinformation.
- **Congress can enact legislation to ensure that SuperPACs are in fact operating independently of campaigns**, including closing any loopholes that allow those close to candidates to coordinate with single-candidate SuperPACs run by large donors.
- We must **close the federal contractor loophole** so that federal contractors earning income from government contracts cannot contribute to federal candidates.

Promoting Ethics in America's Government

Americans have increasingly lost faith and trust in our government. For too long, Americans have not seen changes made in the halls of Congress or in state capitols that impact their everyday lives. We must restore trust in government with clear ethical standards that every elected official is held to. Cleaning up corruption in the government itself is a foundational approach to strengthening our democracy and putting the public interest before any corporate special interest. Here's where we can start:

- As with safeguarding the right to vote and getting big money out of politics, we must **pass and enact into law H.R. 1 For the People Act of 2019** to restore ethics in government.
- Along with H.R. 1, we must pass and enact into law the **Protecting Our Democracy Act** to stop executive branch abuses of power before they start, restore checks and balances between America's three branches of government, and forcefully defend our elections against foreign interference so Americans trust their democratic processes are in line with the will of the voter.
- Congress **must exert oversight over inaugural committees and presidential transitions** and be a stronger check to political appointees – especially those that were large campaign contributors.
- In addition to oversight, Congress must hold executive branch officeholders accountable to **swiftly and completely release financial disclosures** and establish regulations around conflicts of interest that most presidents customarily have addressed.
- Candidates for president and vice president as well as office holders must be required to annually **release their tax returns**.
- Congress must address and close loopholes that allow dark-money groups to exact outsized influence over appointments and confirmations to **the federal courts**, including the Supreme Court.
- The federal judiciary should be party to the development of a **code of ethics** that their members must adhere to.
- Regulators must **enforce violations of the Hatch Act**.
- We must **end the revolving door of lobbying** and **ban foreign government use of lobbyists**.
- The American public should be privy to who is lobbying and who is one the receiving end of lobbying **by expanding lobbying disclosure requirements**.
- Executive branch officials must be required to **divest from stocks, bonds or other holdings** that may be influenced by the actions of their agency in which they work.
- The same standard should be **extended to members of Congress**.
- We must **end the loophole that allows public officials to transfer assets into trusts controlled by family members** to skirt around financial disclosure requirements.
- Congress must **strengthen whistleblower protections** so federal employees are empowered to report misdeeds and potential threats to national security.
- Congress must also ensure that the **executive branch not abuse its power by interfering in federal investigations** or other specific cases and prosecutions.
- Strict limits must be placed on what **constitutes cause to relieve inspectors general of their duties**. Inspectors general should have total and complete independence from officials in the executive branch agencies in which they preside.
- The executive branch must reduce and **eliminate conflicts of interest between for-profit contractors that do business with the government** and officials within the government.



- The federal government must take **substantial steps toward diversity, equity and inclusion** so those working in our government accurately reflect they people they serve.
- Finally, we **must improve government customer service** and give Americans far better access to their elected representatives at every level. This includes equipping official offices with state-of-the-art CRM technologies, training staffers in best practices to communicate and meet the needs of constituents, and holding elected officials accountable to these standards as well.

Conclusion

There will be much work to do to rebuild Americans' trust in our government and in democracy itself. From that trust, we as a nation can build toward policies that improve the lives of all Americans – from making healthcare more affordable to investing in our infrastructure, creating a more inclusive economy with better wages for all and tackling the climate crisis head-on. Strengthening America's democracy so it moves closer toward meeting its promise is the foundation for accomplishing these legislative priorities.

Rooting out corruption, empowering Americans to have a voice with their vote, reducing the influence of corporate special interests in our politics, and restoring ethics and integrity in our government are central to making our democracy work for the people.

Fighting Corruption and Strengthening America's Democracy is the final installment of the **Compact for the American Future**. Together with [Healthcare for the 21st Century](#), [An Economy that Works for all Americans](#), [Building America's Infrastructure](#), [Building for the Digital Future](#) and [Defeating Climate Change and Building a More Sustainable Future](#), we can ensure a brighter, freer, fairer future for all Americans.