



# WORLDVIEWS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

A Monograph Series

## Governing in a Polarized America

Bipartisan Policy Center's  
Commission on Political Reform



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# **Governing in a Polarized America: A Bipartisan Blueprint to Strengthen Our Democracy**

  
Bipartisan Policy Center's  
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## *Worldviews for the 21st Century: A Monograph Series*

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# **Governing in a Polarized America: A Bipartisan Blueprint to Strengthen Our Democracy**

**Bipartisan Policy Center's  
Commission on Political Reform**

The Bipartisan Policy Center launched the Commission on Political Reform in 2013 to investigate the causes and consequences of America's partisan political divide and to advocate for specific reforms that will improve the political process and that will work in a polarized atmosphere.

The commission met at public and private institutions across the country to hear from interested citizens, political leaders, and issue experts about the problems and potential solutions. It is clear that Americans are concerned about the lack of civil discourse and the increasing inability of the U.S. political system to grapple with the nation's biggest challenges. These shortcomings put the nation at risk of losing its standing in the world.

This report, *Governing in a Polarized America: A Bipartisan Blueprint to Strengthen our Democracy*, is the culmination of the commission's public and private deliberations, but it is not the end of its work. Our recommendations provide a realistic path forward to strengthen U.S. democracy. The commission does not pretend to have discovered the cure to all that ails democracy. But, 29 Americans have come together as part of our commission to embrace a truly bipartisan reform agenda.

The commission identifies reforms in three specific areas: the electoral process, the process by which Congress legislates and manages its own affairs, and the ability of Americans to plug into the

nation's civic life through public service. We chose to focus on three broad areas of reform, because the polarization in the United States runs deeply through its institutions, affects the ways Americans elect political leader and how the institutions of government operate, and even puts in danger Americans' deep-seated desire to serve their nation.

## **Electoral System Reform**

Our first set of recommendations covers the electoral “rules of the game,” by which men and women are elected to serve their neighbors. The sad truth is that both major political parties firmly believe the other party is engaged in a constant mission of manipulating these rules to obtain an unfair advantage. This sense of distrust permeates the entire electoral process and reverberates into the legislative realm. If Americans do not trust that the system is on the level and think it has broken down, The United States will no longer be able to claim a government that rules with the consent of the governed.

The commission proposes the following recommendation to reduce distrust in the electoral system:

- States should adopt redistricting commissions that have the bipartisan support of the legislature and the electorate.
- States and political parties should strive to dramatically increase the number of voters who cast ballots in political primaries. They should strive to increase the number of eligible voters who turnout in 2020 by 30 percent and in 2026 by 35 percent.
- States should move away from very low-turnout methods of candidate selection, such as caucuses and conventions.
- States should create a single, national congressional primary date in June.
- States should dramatically improve access to their voter-registration lists by strengthening opportunities to register to vote and identifying eligible unregistered voters and contacting them with the opportunity to register. To ensure greater integrity, states should encourage direct opportunities for voter to input their own registrations information and update their addresses. States should also conduct crosschecks with other states' lists

and with other databases to eliminate ineligible registrations or to correct mistakes on registration rolls.

- Political contributions, including those made to outside and independent groups, should be disclosed so that citizens have full information about who is paying for the political messages they see.
- Congress should pass legislation requiring detailed disclosure of spending by congressional leadership PACs and mandating that leader PAC funds be used solely for political activities (such as donations to other candidates) and not for personal use.
- In its rules, Congress should limit the use of leadership PACs to the top three congressional leaders of each party in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

### **Congressional Reform**

Our second set of recommendations focuses on the institutions that is at the epicenter of today's polarized politics; the U.S. Congress. For many Americans, the Congress is simply not performing the job it is required to do – passing budgets, responsibly managing the nation's finances, making the decisions necessary to ensure that government functions at a basic level of efficiency. Regular gridlock has damaged Congress's reputation with the American people, and congressional job approval has dropped to near record lows.

That is why the commission recommends reforming Congress in ways that will lead to a better-functioning institution during this period of hyperpolarization:

- The House of Representatives and the Senate should schedule synchronized, five-day workweeks in Washington, with three weeks in session followed by one-week recesses.
- The president should hold regular, monthly meetings with congressional leader and be invited by leadership to attend joint congressional caucuses twice a year.
- Full-fledged conference committees between the chambers on important legislation are essential to ensuring greater member participation in the policy process.
- Committee chairs should solicit the views of all committee

members well in advance of a committee markup and should pay special attention to the minority members so that efforts are made to incorporate as many of their suggested changes into the “chairman’s mark” before the bill is marked up by the full committee.

- It should be the policy of the Senate that changes to its rules be made at the start of a new Congress. Debate over changes to those rules will come to a conclusion and to a vote when two-thirds of the Senate agrees to them.
- The Senate majority leader is encouraged to exercise the leader’s discretion under the rules to allow, on a selective basis, for a filibuster to proceed uninterrupted until all senators wishing to speak have done so.
- The Senate should establish a process that gives priority consideration to a minimum of ten amendments offered by and alternating between senators of both parties.
- Congress should adopt a biennial budget process that includes two-year budget resolutions and appropriations bills, with expedited consideration given to enacting into law two-year discretionary spending ceilings for enforcement purposes.

### **A Call to Service**

Successful democracies require an educated citizenry who actively participates in civic life. Unfortunately, over the past five decades, the United States has witnessed a steady and perilous decline in the habits that define U.S. citizens: fewer Americans volunteer, charitable giving is lower, and many young adults increasingly question the value of seeking elective office. So our third set of recommendations is geared to reversing these trends and reinforcing the notion that, as Americans, we are all part of a common enterprise that requires a lifetime of civic engagement.

Our broad set of recommendations is generally focused on engaging more people in civic life:

- All Americans ages 18 to 28 should commit to one full year of service to their communities and the nation. This commitment can be fulfilled by participating in any type of full-time service,

including military service; civilian service, in programs such as the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps; or volunteer service, through local and national nonprofits and religious entities that serve communities and the country.

- Colleges and universities should reaffirm their missions to develop engaged and active citizens and encourage service in formal and informal programs.
- Consistent with state constitutions, schools should refocus on their original civic missions to provide the core values, knowledge, and ideas from U.S. history in civic learning that will equip the next generation of active, engaged citizens. Educators need modern curricula, professional development, and training to provide adequate civic skills to young Americans.
- The federal government must leverage additional resources to increase the supply of available positions in AmeriCorps, VISTA, and the Peace Corps—successful government-service programs that turn away countless individuals each year.
- The public and private sectors should create a nationally recognized “qualified service” opportunity program that uses modern technology to match the supply of existing yearlong service opportunities to the demand of applicants seeking to meet their new cultural expectation to serve.
- Political parties should ensure that all efforts are made to engage under-30 candidates by providing them with candidate training and access to the resources necessary to run competitive campaigns for elective office at the local, state, and federal levels.
- For federal appointees, only the 500 filling the top policymaking roles in the various departments and agencies should require confirmation by the Senate.
- Presidential administrations should open political appointments to the widest possible pool of applicants. They should not impose overly burdensome pre-employment restrictions or rule out entire classes of candidates, but they should consider the merits of each individual for a position of public service.



These proposals are not a magic elixir that will restore America's body politic to health overnight. We do not call for a constitutional convention, the establishment of a viable, national third party, or for a billion-dollar campaign to educate the public. Our recommendations are practical and achievable and, if implemented, will be a first step toward lowering the temperature on an overheating, polarized political process. We present a series of ideas that can generate true bipartisan support while remaining mindful of the political divisions that define the country and the political imperatives that influence the decisions of elected leaders. Taken together, these recommendations have the potential to transform the nation's politics and civic life. The result will be a stronger, more united country that is better equipped to meet the challenges of our times.

*The Bipartisan Policy Center, located in Washington, D.C., launched the Commission on Political Reform in March 2013 to investigate the causes and consequences of the U.S. partisan political divide, which is detrimental to both domestic and foreign policy-making. In its search for reforms, the commission convened a series of national conversations at presidential libraries, universities and other public institutions in the United States. It issued a report with final recommendations in June 2014. The Bipartisan Policy Center entered into a partnership with the University of Central Florida in 2014, and granted permission for the commission report's executive summary to be used in this monograph series.*