

DEMOCRACY

Easy to Participate In, Hard to Corrupt

A democracy easy to join, hard to buy, and strong enough to survive bad-faith power.

PILLAR 1 · HUMAN-CENTERED DEMOCRACY AND EQUAL REPRESENTATION

AT A GLANCE

The problem

Registration is the gate to participation and it leaks; elections remain exposed to bad-faith power.

The proposal

Automatic registration everywhere, a statutory federal right to vote, fair representation.

Cost & funding

Low; these are mostly rules, not spending programs.

Evidence strength

Strong on registration effects (multi-state natural experiments); modest on turnout, and the brief says so.

Principal risk

Courts foreclosing the statutory route; fallback is the slower amendment path.

Success looks like

Registration and participation rates rising with roll integrity intact.

Summary

A democracy has to do two jobs at the same time. It has to protect every citizen's right to take part, and it has to be hard for the powerful to corrupt. Right now ours does the reverse. It makes voting harder than it needs to be, lets gerrymandered maps and the Electoral College hand power to the side that lost the most votes, allows concentrated money to drown out ordinary citizens, and leaves the courts and the executive branch with too few guardrails against people who would abuse them. This brief is not a list of small fixes. It is a plan to make American democracy easy to join, hard to buy, and strong enough to survive people who would tear it down from the inside.

It proposes ten reforms: automatic voter registration at eighteen, secure and flexible verification, Election Day as a national holiday, real standards for polling access, protection against intimidation and economic coercion, fair representation through the National Popular Vote Compact and an end to gerrymandering, statehood for Washington, D.C. and self-determination for Puerto Rico, campaign finance reform that confronts Citizens United, ethics and term limits for the Supreme Court, and durable safeguards against authoritarian abuse. The lead reform is worth stating plainly, because its history makes it hard to dismiss as partisan. Universal voter registration was first put before Congress by a Democratic president from the South, Jimmy Carter, in 1977¹, and the first states to put automatic registration into practice through their motor vehicle agencies include Georgia, which did it under Republican officials.

The Principle

There are two comfortable ways to be wrong about democracy. One says it is basically fine as long as the formal procedures still run, even when those procedures no longer produce equal representation or public trust. The other treats every safeguard and every verification as a trick. Both are wrong. A democracy should be easy to participate in, hard to corrupt, and able to deliver results. It is not only how we choose our leaders. It is how people govern the systems that shape their daily lives, and it has to actually work for them. A government that is easy to capture, easy to buy, and unable to deliver will not hold the public's faith for long, and a democracy that loses the public's faith does not stay a democracy. The reforms here are deliberately ambitious, because the threats are not modest and the small fixes have not met them.

The System Failure

Start with access, because it is the most basic. Across the country, registration is made unnecessarily hard, polling places close and consolidate in the places that can least afford long lines, and a wave of state laws over the past several years has compressed early and absentee voting and added new burdens that fall hardest on lower-income voters and voters of color. None of this makes elections more secure. It makes them harder to take part in, which is the point of it.

The deeper damage is structural. Partisan gerrymandering lets mapmakers choose their voters instead of the other way around. The Electoral College and the malapportionment of power regularly let the candidate who lost the popular vote take office. The Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* disabled the part of the Voting Rights Act that had blocked discriminatory voting changes before they took effect. Citizens United opened the door to unlimited and often hidden money. The Court itself operates with no enforceable ethics code while its public standing falls. And the last several years have shown how quickly a determined leader can bend public agencies to personal ends, intimidate civil servants, and stretch emergency powers. These are not failures of too little procedure. They are the failures of a democracy that has become too easy to corrupt and too weak to defend itself.

It is worth noting what works, because the strongest reform in this brief has already been tested, in red states and blue, and measured. Georgia, under Republican officials, began automatically registering eligible citizens through its motor vehicle agency in 2016, and the share of eligible Georgians registered climbed from 78 percent to 98 percent by 2020², nearly doubling the state's rate of new registrations. Oregon, the first state to pass the law, quadrupled its rate of new registrations at the DMV and registered roughly 116,000 people who would otherwise likely never have registered at all.³ Across the first eight jurisdictions to adopt it, automatic registration signed up about 2.2 million new voters in just a few years, with registration gains ranging from 9 to 94 percent across states of every size and both parties.⁴ Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia now run some form of it, adopted with strong bipartisan support in states as different as West Virginia, Vermont, and Georgia. The tools to fix this exist. What has been missing is the will to use them everywhere.

The Proposal

The Constitution gives Congress real authority over federal elections and real power to enforce the Reconstruction Amendments, and states and localities run the machinery. This brief proposes ten reforms across those levels.

1. **Automatic voter registration at eighteen.** Turning eighteen should mean full participation in American democracy, with every eligible citizen registered automatically and issued a registration card. The burden of navigating a confusing system should not fall on the citizen. This is not a fringe idea. It was first proposed by a U.S. president, it has been put into practice by states under both parties, and where it has been tried it has pushed registration toward universal. It should be the national standard. The evidence also answers the question of who this reaches, and the answer is the people the current system misses most. Oregon's data showed automatic registrants were disproportionately young, more rural, from lower-income and less-educated areas, and from more Latino areas than traditional registrants, which means the reform did not just grow the rolls, it made the electorate more representative of the actual public. And it cleans the rolls as it grows them: with roughly one in eight registrations nationwide outdated or inaccurate, a system that updates automatically at every DMV visit is an accuracy reform as much as an access reform, which is why election officials of both parties tend to like it once they run it.
2. **Secure, flexible verification.** Voting should be secure and accessible at once. A voter should be able to confirm eligibility with a registration card, a government ID, or a registration card paired with reasonable proof of name and address. The goal is to keep safeguards from hardening into barriers.
3. **Election Day as a national holiday.** Whether a person can vote should not depend on having a flexible job, paid time off, childcare, or an understanding employer. Make Election Day a national holiday, close nonessential federal services, and require or support paid time to vote, with help for small businesses. No one should have to choose between a paycheck and a ballot.
4. **Real standards for polling access.** No citizen should face hours in line or an inaccessible polling place because of where they live. Federal standards should guarantee enough locations, real accessibility, language assistance, early voting, and mail voting. A long line is not a sign of civic enthusiasm. It is a sign that the system failed.
5. **Protection against intimidation and economic coercion.** No employer, landlord, or powerful institution should be able to use economic pressure to dictate how a person votes. People and organizations are free to argue for their views. They are not free to threaten someone's job, housing, or livelihood over a ballot. The rule is written to protect speech while prohibiting coercion and retaliation.

6. **Fair representation.** Every vote should carry equal weight. Advance the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, end partisan gerrymandering through independent redistricting, allow proportional or multi-member districts where they fit, and restore the Voting Rights Act's protections. The Electoral College and gerrymandered maps routinely convert a minority of the votes into a majority of the power, and a serious democracy should not treat that as normal.
7. **Statehood and self-determination.** People who live under American law deserve a vote in writing it. Washington, D.C. should become a state, and Puerto Rico should be given a binding process of self-determination that Congress commits in advance to honor, including statehood if its people choose it. Equal citizenship cannot mean a permanent second-class political status.
8. **Campaign finance and anti-corruption reform.** Public office should not be for sale. Confront Citizens United through a constitutional amendment or structural limits, expand public financing, strengthen disclosure, restrict dark money, and enforce anti-corruption law. There will always be money in politics. Concentrated wealth should not be allowed to drown out everyone else.
9. **Ethics and term limits for the Supreme Court.** Courts must be independent, but independence is not the same thing as having no accountability at all. Put in place enforceable ethics and recusal rules, regularize appointments, and adopt staggered, long terms for the justices. The aim is not to capture the Court. It is to keep it from becoming an unaccountable political institution.
10. **Safeguards against authoritarian abuse.** Democracy has to be protected from capture. Build durable safeguards against the abuse of executive power, loyalty tests that replace expertise, political retaliation through public agencies, the intimidation of civil servants, and the use of public power for private revenge. A free government needs rules strong enough to survive a bad-faith leader.

Privacy Is a Democratic Safeguard

Surveillance belongs in this brief because a democracy where the government or anyone with a checkbook can assemble a citizen's complete life is a democracy with a standing vulnerability. The position: a comprehensive federal privacy law with data minimization and real enforcement; closing the data-broker loophole by requiring a warrant for government purchase of location and communications data it would otherwise need a warrant to collect; strict limits on facial recognition and biometric surveillance in public spaces, with bans on their use against protected speech and assembly; and the authoritarian-abuse safeguards of this brief extended to the surveillance stack, because the machinery built for convenience is the machinery a bad-faith leader inherits. The platform practices what it proposes: this site runs no trackers, and its privacy page is written in plain language.

Implementation Pathway

Most of this agenda runs through Congress: automatic registration standards, the Election Day holiday, polling and verification standards, restored Voting Rights Act protections, anti-coercion law, campaign finance reform, statehood, the Puerto Rico process, and judicial ethics and term limits. The honest obstacle is the Senate filibuster, which has buried versions of this agenda before, so filibuster reform and patient coalition-building are part of the work rather than a footnote. The National Popular Vote Compact moves a different way, state by state, and takes effect once states holding a majority of electoral votes have joined. Independent redistricting, expanded early and mail voting, registration modernization, and state-level public financing are state choices, and accessible polling, language access, and the recruitment of election workers are local ones. This is not only a Washington project. It has to be built everywhere people meet their government.

Funding and Public-Value Logic

Most of this costs very little. Automatic registration runs through systems states already operate, and it tends to save money by keeping voter rolls accurate. The Election Day holiday, polling standards, and verification are administrative. The structural reforms are mostly questions of rules, not spending. The one real expense, public financing of elections, is modest set against the prize, which is a politics less owned by concentrated money. The return is the foundation the rest of this platform stands on. A democracy that is easy to join, hard to buy, and able to deliver is what makes it possible to win and hold everything else, from housing to health care to fair markets. That is why this pillar comes first.

Risks and Guardrails

One honesty requirement, so the claim never outruns the evidence: automatic registration is proven to grow and clean the rolls, but registration is not the same as turnout. People registered automatically vote at lower rates than people who registered themselves, partly because they skew younger, and the research finds the turnout gain is real but more modest than the registration gain, enough new registrants vote that overall participation rises, but the effect is measured in points, not landslides. So the case for the reform rests where the evidence puts it: equal access, representative rolls, accuracy, and lower administrative cost, with a modest turnout dividend on top. That is a strong case. It does not need inflation, and inflating it hands opponents the only rebuttal they have.

Access and security are not opposites, and the verification reform here is built to deliver both, with auditable, transparent systems. The anti-coercion rule has to draw a clear line between protected argument and actual threats or retaliation; it targets coercion, not opinion. Court reform has to be built around ethics, legitimacy, and regularity rather than partisan revenge, because term limits and ethics rules strengthen the institution while packing it for advantage would wreck it. And none of this works on paper alone. Registration, mail and early voting, polling standards, and election security all require funding, staffing, and administration, and reform has to connect to delivery, so that people can see a working democracy improve their lives.

Metrics for Success

Judge the agenda on participation, fairness, and trust.

- The share of eligible citizens registered and voting, and the gaps across race, age, and disability.
- Wait times and the rate at which absentee ballots are rejected, tracked for disparities.
- How fairly district maps translate votes into seats, measured against partisan-skew benchmarks, and the gap between the popular vote and the result.
- The share of campaign money that is small-dollar or publicly matched, set against the volume of dark money.
- Adoption of judicial ethics and recusal rules, and public confidence in the courts.
- Retention of election administrators and the number of threats made against them.

Opposition and Responses

Some will call this a partisan power grab. The lead reform, automatic registration, was proposed by a president of one party and put into practice by officials of the other, and it is supported by a clear majority of Americans across the spectrum. The agenda is about equal citizenship, not advantage. If a fair process happens to favor one side, that is a fact about that side's appeal, not a reason to keep the process unfair. And the adoption record settles it. This reform was implemented under Republican officials in Georgia and passed with strong bipartisan votes in West Virginia and Vermont, and the registration gains showed up across party lines in every kind of state. A policy Republicans adopted and Democrats championed, that grows the rolls and cleans them at once, is not a power grab. It is the rare election reform with a track record instead of a talking point. Some will say that ending the Electoral College or adding states rigs the system. Counting every vote equally is the opposite of rigging. The National Popular Vote Compact simply means the candidate with the most votes wins, and statehood for D.C. and self-determination for Puerto Rico extend representation to citizens who already pay taxes and obey the law without a vote in Congress. Some will say that term limits and ethics rules attack judicial independence. Independence and unaccountability are not the same thing. Enforceable ethics, recusal standards, and regular, staggered terms are how serious institutions hold their legitimacy, and they strengthen the Court rather than bend it to a party. And some will say you cannot get money out of politics. The aim is not to remove money but to stop concentrated wealth from drowning out everyone else, which is exactly what public financing and disclosure are built to do.

Legal Pathways and Risks

Democracy reforms get litigated, so this brief states its legal theory in advance: which power each plank runs on, where the courts are likely to push back, and what the fallback is. Pretending these questions away is how reforms die in year three.

The voting floor (planks 1 through 4). Congress's power over the times, places, and manner of congressional elections is broad and directly stated in the Constitution's Elections Clause, and it is the settled basis of the motor-voter law the Supreme Court has enforced. So automatic registration, verification standards, early and mail voting floors, and polling-access requirements are written to federal elections, where the authority is strongest; in practice states run one registration system, so the floor carries. Extending mandates to purely state and local elections rests on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment enforcement powers, which the current Court reads narrowly, so the design does not depend on that reach.

Restoring the Voting Rights Act (plank 6). The John Lewis Act rebuilds the preclearance coverage formula that *Shelby County v. Holder* struck down in 2013, using current data because that was the Court's stated objection. It will be tested before the same Court that decided *Shelby* and narrowed Section 2 in *Brnovich*, and this platform does not pretend otherwise. The fallback is the unglamorous one: litigation under what remains of Section 2, disclosure, and the federal-election floor above, which does not depend on preclearance.

Anti-coercion (plank 5). Federal law already criminalizes voter intimidation; this plank extends the logic to economic retaliation by employers and landlords. It is drafted against conduct, threats and retaliation, never against speech or persuasion, which is what lets it survive First Amendment review.

Fair representation (plank 6). Rucho v. Common Cause closed the federal courts to partisan-gerrymandering claims in 2019, which is exactly why the remedy here is structural rather than judicial: independent commissions, which the Court upheld when created by initiative in the Arizona redistricting case, and statutory options for multi-member or proportional districts in congressional elections, which sit on the same Elections Clause authority as everything else. The National Popular Vote compact is the honestly uncertain one: whether it requires congressional consent under the Compact Clause is an open question scholars split on, litigation at the moment it takes effect is certain, and the fallbacks are stated, seek congressional consent to cure the defect, or continue the state-by-state work the compact requires anyway.

Statehood (plank 7). Congress admits states by simple statute and has done so thirty-seven times. The real complication for D.C. is the Twenty-Third Amendment, which would leave three electoral votes attached to the shrunken federal district; an honest statehood bill pairs admission with repeal or statutory neutralization of that remnant, and expects litigation either way. Puerto Rico's binding process is statutory start to finish.

Money in politics (plank 8). The brief already splits this honestly: disclosure survives current precedent, the Citizens United decision itself upheld disclosure eight to one; voluntary public financing is constitutional; anti-corruption enforcement is statutory. Spending limits on independent expenditures do not survive current precedent, which is why the brief says amendment or structural limits rather than promising a statute the courts have already rejected.

The Supreme Court (plank 9). Enforceable ethics and recusal rules extend a statute that already binds the justices on paper, and regularizing appointments is statutory. Term limits are the contested piece: the senior-status design, where justices rotate to other duties after eighteen years, is defended by serious scholars and doubted by others under the good-behavior clause, so the honest statement is that statute is the fast route with real constitutional risk, and amendment is the certain route on a slower clock. The plank's aim, staggered long terms, can be pursued on both tracks at once.

Safeguards against abuse (plank 10). Almost entirely statutory and squarely within Congress's power: civil-service protections, inspector-general independence, vacancy-law reform, and emergency-powers limits. The real risk is not constitutionality but enforcement against a hostile executive, which is why the designs favor automatic mechanisms, protected independent officials, and court-enforceable rights over norms that depend on goodwill.

What Would Change Our Position

Automatic registration earns its place from measured results, so results could take it away: if AVR states began producing documented noncitizen registration at meaningful rates, or sustained roll-integrity failures that manual systems avoid, the plank would need rework rather than defense. If ranked-choice or open-primary systems showed persistent ballot-error rates concentrated among low-income or elderly voters, adoption would slow until design fixed it. And if courts foreclose the statutory route to a federal right to vote, the honest fallback is the amendment path, stated as the longer road it is. What would not change the position: turnout effects staying modest, which the brief already concedes; registration is the gate, not the guarantee.

Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. A democracy should be easy to join, hard to buy, and strong enough to survive people who would abuse it. Right now ours is close to the opposite. So register every American at eighteen, the way it has already been done in red states and blue. Make Election Day a holiday. Stop bosses and landlords from leaning on your vote. Count every vote equally. Get the dark money out, put real ethics on the Supreme Court, and give the citizens of D.C. and Puerto Rico the representation they are owed. None of this is radical. It is just what a democracy is supposed to be.

SOURCES

1. President Carter's 1977 election reform message to Congress (American Presidency Project) ↩
2. Center for Election Innovation & Research on Georgia's automatic voter registration ↩
3. Center for American Progress analysis of Oregon's first-in-the-nation AVR rollout (advocacy-adjacent analysis of state data) ↩
4. Brennan Center for Justice, "AVR Impact on State Voter Registration" (democracy-reform advocacy organization; figures from state registration records) ↩