

PRIORITIES FOR PROGRESS 2021

DEMOCRACY

Durable solutions to the problems we face won't come from small fixes around the edges. We need solutions that build power for everyday people to emerge from this crisis as a more resilient, just nation. The work ahead of the next president and the next Congress to achieve these goals is formidable. And we can't afford for them to fail.

To help ensure that we are ready to meet this extraordinary moment, organizations from across the progressive movement gathered together to develop policy agendas on key progressive priorities, including both legislative and administrative proposals.



CONTRIBUTORS

Color of Change

Common Cause

Demos

End Citizens United/Let American Vote

Public Citizen

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

GOALS PRINCIPLES VALUES

LEGISLATIVE

Our democracy works best when everyone's vote is counted, every voice is heard, and our elected officials are reflective of and accountable to our communities. The Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC) should prioritize passage of a comprehensive set of reforms to create a strong, equitable, and just democracy.

We must ensure that every American has the right to vote and to have that vote counted, reverse the systematic disenfranchisement of communities of color and other marginalized communities by restoring and expanding the full strength of the Voting Rights Act, eliminating felony disenfranchisement, banning voter suppression practices, and granting District of Columbia (D.C.) statehood and ensuring it's 705,000 residents have voting representation in Congress.

We must open up our political system and end the dominance of big money in politics through empowering small donors, bringing secret money into the light, and reducing the power of an overwhelmingly white, large donor class and corporate special interests in politics.

We must ensure the safety and security of our democracy by ensuring states have the resources they need to conduct safe and fair elections during a public health crisis, protecting our voting systems from foreign interference, and putting strong safeguards in place to protect the rule of law.

We must boost the civic power of communities of color and working families more broadly in our democracy, in opposition to corporate interests and wealthy individuals, by strengthening workers' organizations and other grassroots organizations, and by protecting the right to protest.

Building a truly inclusive, equitable democracy is critical to making progress on so many progressive priorities, whether that's tackling climate change, addressing the epidemic of gun violence in our country, ensuring affordable, quality healthcare for all, or making sure that people are paid fairly for the work that they do and creating an equitable economy. It is also essential to give voice to communities marginalized by the current system that is baked into our democracy and to building a political system that actually works for all people for the first time. Working together, these policies will address the racial and economic inequities in our political system, creating a democracy that works for all of us—not just the wealthy and powerful.

ADMINISTRATIVE

The current administration has exposed the need to shift away from norms to laws of accountability. They have undermined the rule of law while doling out favors to the president's family, friends, and special interests that fund his campaign. This corruption and suppression have hit Black and brown communities hardest and undermines our ongoing work toward building an inclusive, multiracial democracy. The next president must offer a contrasting vision for our democracy and offer a clean break from the last administration through immediate executive actions and appointments that show Americans he is committed to a democracy that works for all of us.

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

FIRST 100 DAYS

To build support and ensure the success of a progressive legislative agenda in 2021, it's critical for all democracy reform legislation (as defined by the bills listed in this section) to move through Congress as early and expeditiously as possible. It should be treated as the predicate for ensuring progressive success on many other issues, and the scene setter for the agenda.

PASS H.R. 1 – THE FOR THE PEOPLE ACT

The For the People Act is a comprehensive package of anti-corruption, ethics, and voting rights reforms that will end the dominance of big money in politics, open up our political system to more diverse voices, and make it easier for Americans to cast a ballot. It passed the House in March 2019 with unanimous support from House Democrats.

PASS H.R. 4 – THE VOTING RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT ACT

The Voting Rights Advancement Act (recently renamed the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act in the Senate and the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act in the House, in honor of the late civil rights icon Congressman John Lewis) would restore key provisions of the Voting Rights Act by creating a new formula under which covered states and localities would be required to have voting changes pre-cleared by the Justice Department or federal courts. It would help ensure that every American can cast their ballot free from discrimination. H.R. 4 passed the House in December 2019 with bipartisan support.

PASS H.R. 51 – THE WASHINGTON, D.C. ADMISSION ACT

The Washington, D.C. Admission Act would grant statehood to Washington, D.C. and ensure the city's more than 700,000 residents, a majority of whom are people of color, have voting representation in Congress. For over 200 years, the residents of Washington, D.C. have been disenfranchised and forced to bear the burdens of democracy without many of the benefits. The efforts of the civil rights movement will remain incomplete until this bill is signed into law, as the right to vote is meaningless if you cannot elect anyone to represent you and choose that representative. It passed the House in June 2020.

PASS H.R.1694 – THE NATIVE AMERICAN VOTING RIGHTS ACT

The Native American Voting Rights Act strengthens protections for the voting rights of Native American and Alaska Native people by increasing registration and polling places on tribal lands, improving language access, ensuring acceptance of tribal IDs, and providing new enforcement mechanisms. It was introduced in the House in March 2019, and findings language was included in H.R. 1.



BEYOND 100 DAYS

CONGRESSIONAL ETHICS REFORM

While H.R. 1 addresses many important executive branch ethics and conflict-of-interest reforms, the House and Senate should also look at ways it can strengthen its own rules and codify independent ethics watchdogs (the Office of Congressional Ethics and a newly created Senate counterpart) to add effective and timely oversight and accountability to both Chambers. Congress can take additional steps to strengthen independent ethics watchdogs, close lobbying loopholes, and institute necessary regulatory reforms to prevent corporate interests from using the rulemaking process to peddle misinformation and undermine public safety. Many of these reforms are found in H.R. 7140 (115th Congress), the Anti-Corruption and Public Integrity Act.

JUDICIAL ETHICS REFORM

Similarly, H.R. 1 addresses some aspects of judicial ethics reform by extending the judicial Code of Conduct to include Supreme Court justices as well as lower court judges. The House and Senate should explore other ethics reforms to further the public's trust in the judiciary and ensure justices and judges are fair and impartial. This includes further transparency efforts for proceedings and disclosures of activities and finances.

VOTING RIGHTS

While the aforementioned bills are critical to expanding and protecting access to the ballot box, additional protections may be necessary in 2021 to safeguard the fundamental right to vote during the ongoing pandemic, against future natural disasters that will occur more frequently as a result of climate change, and in the face of increasingly violent right-wing harassment and intimidation. The HEROES Act, passed by the House in May 2020, contains several critical provisions along these lines, but Senate Republicans refused to include them in the most recent COVID-19 relief bill. Congress must provide robust funding for states to modernize their election systems, expand access to the ballot, and guard against disinformation and intimidation—especially for the communities of color that historically and presently are targeted for harassment and voter suppression. There may also be other voter suppression tactics (including online) that emerge this election cycle that will require a response.

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AND ELECTION SECURITY

Congress must look seriously at the continued threat of foreign interference in our elections and ensure states have the resources they need to ensure the safety and security of our elections. This could include new funding for states and requirements that election administrators implement new procedures to protect against any interference.

RULE OF LAW

President Trump and his administration have abused the trust of the American people in a wide-ranging set of ways. They have inappropriately interfered with federal investigations, fired independent watchdogs, pardoned and commuted sentences of cronies, retaliated against whistleblowers, failed to share information as required with Congress, and withheld Congressional funds in an attempt to get a foreign government to interfere in the 2020 election. We need a robust suite of reforms to ensure that these kinds of abuses of power can never happen again, and as a start we urge support of the Abuse of the Pardon Prevention Act (H.R. 1627) to clarify that employing pardons as a bribe is unconstitutional and to shine a light on a President's use of the power, and the No President is Above the Law Act (H.R. 2678) to pause the statute of limitations to ensure that presidents are still held accountable for criminal conduct. Passing the Protecting Our Democracy Act (H.R. 8363) would go a long way toward ensuring that future administrations follow and uphold the letter and spirit of the law. These bills would be important steps towards meaningfully reaffirming that no one—not even the president—is above the law.

RAISE VOICES TOGETHER

Corporations and the wealthy use money to get attention, but ordinary people need to band together to make their voices heard in our democracy. These include non-profit corporations, small-donor collectives, and labor unions, all of which are critical counterbalances to the power of the wealthy. Congress should pursue additional reforms to ensure working people have a voice and power in our democracy, and to support small donor organizing.

ADDRESS THE RACIAL INJUSTICES AT THE ROOT OF OUR DEMOCRACY

We cannot fully correct for the deficiencies in our democracy without acknowledging and beginning to repair the harms done to Black people at our nation's founding, and since. Congress should take up H.R.40 to address the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery.

ADMINISTRATIVE PRIORITIES

FIRST 100 DAYS

The next president must lead by example to swiftly put in place appointees committed to protecting our democracy while enacting strong ethics policies to send a message to America and the rest of the government that he is a president who believes in democracy and the rule of law.

DAY ONE EXECUTIVE ORDER

The next president should be ready on Day One to prioritize and expedite the selection of judicial nominees who have a demonstrated commitment to civil and human rights, who believe the Constitution protects all of us, not just the wealthy and powerful, and who reflect the great diversity of our country.

The next president should issue a Day One Executive Order that would accomplish the following:

- Implement strong, transparent ethics rules and implement a Day One ethics pledge for senior staff and appointees with clear consequences for those who undermine or break it.
- Publish White House and agency visitor logs and agency ethics documents.
- Combat the reverse and traditional revolving door within the administration including stopping the practice of golden parachutes.
- Direct federal agencies to take seriously the threat of foreign interference in our elections and provide clear objectives to protecting the safety and security of our voting systems.
- Direct federal agencies to prioritize protecting the right of all Americans to vote safely, securely, and free from discrimination, including directing the Department of Justice (DOJ) to reinvigorate enforcement of voting rights statutes.
- Direct relevant agencies—including the Social Security Administration (SSA), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (via the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) exchanges), Indian Health Services (IHS), U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and



military pay/personnel offices—to provide voter registration services to their clients.

— Engage with federal agencies of relevant jurisdiction (Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), Federal Election Commission (FEC), Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Internal Revenue Service (IRS)) to ensure rulemakings on political spending disclosure are prioritized as first agenda items.

— Appoint a diverse set of cabinet members and government officials at every level of the executive branch committed to a government that’s open, honest, accountable, and committed to the rule of law.

— Direct the Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) to publicly publish all unclassified final opinions and publish an unclassified summary of any final opinion that cannot be published in full to protect properly classified information. The next president should also direct the Attorney General to conduct a review of all OLC opinions that implicate separation of powers issues, and to withdraw any opinions that risk serious executive branch overreach or substantially hinder oversight of the executive branch.

APPOINTMENTS

For a strong system of good government to be put in place, the following positions should be filled quickly, and the White House should also recreate the central position of “Democracy Czar” to oversee democracy reforms and maintain focus on integrity in the administration from Day One. The Czar should focus on democracy issues going forward, with a focus on opportunities for building a more inclusive democracy through both legislation and executive action. This person should come from or be deeply connected to democracy advocacy and/or grassroots organizing on behalf of communities of color.

- Director, Office of Government Ethics Office
- White House Counsel
- Director, Office of Management and Budget
- Director, Presidential Personnel Office
- Administrator of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy
- Commissioners of the Federal Election Commission
- Commissioners of the Election Assistance Commission

BEYOND 100 DAYS

This memo has already outlined the core priorities we encourage the new administration and Congress to take up, and act quickly on, during Day One, the first 100 days, and the first year of the term. Below are additional issue areas to explore to show continued leadership in strengthening our democracy throughout the rest of the term.

ADDITIONAL ISSUE AREAS

— Trust in Congress remains at an all-time low. Tackling corruption in Congress must be an ongoing pursuit to show the American public that both Members and the administration take this issue seriously. One way to do this is by further addressing Congressional insider trading by reforming the Stock Act.

— The residents of the U.S. territories—an overwhelming majority of whom are people of color—are denied sovereignty and forced to endure a perpetual state of colonization by the United States. The administration and Congress should affirm the right of the people of each territory to choose their own political status, as established under international law (UN Declaration 1514), and engage as a good faith partner in implementing those decisions.

— Young people have been leading the way on making change in this country, mobilizing millions of people on issues like police brutality, climate change, ending gun violence, and labor rights. The next administration and Congress should look at ways to further engage young people in the political process to ensure that those who will feel the impact of the decisions of today's policymakers for decades to come have a say in our democracy and their future.

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