



BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER



**COMMISSION ON POLITICAL REFORM**

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

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report is the product of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Commission on Political Reform. The findings and recommendations expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the Bipartisan Policy Center, its founders, or its board of directors

# BPC Commission on Political Reform

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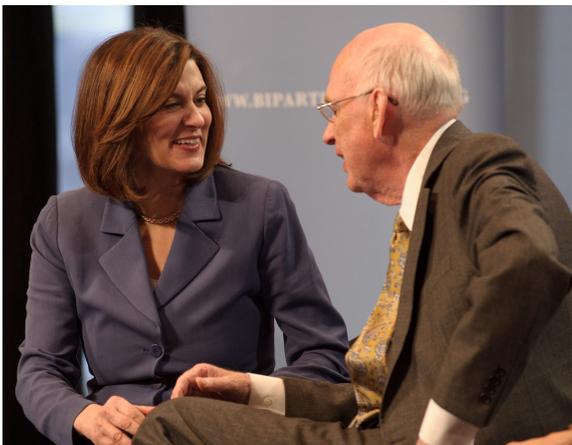
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**Governance Program**  
*Commission on Political Reform*



# Letter from Co-Chairs

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We are honored to serve as co-chairs of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Commission on Political Reform and deeply grateful to both our remarkable group of 24 commission colleagues and to concerned Americans across the country who engaged with us in this effort.

In today's hyper-partisan era, when citizens are more politically divided and get more of their news and information from ideologically driven sources, this effort has provided a forum for those who believe that despite our differences, we must begin to listen to each other and work together in order to find common ground.

As we have seen throughout our careers, many political decision-makers increasingly favor partisan rancor over reasoned debate in discussing national policies. With such deeply held contrasting principles, we as a country must ask: "Can our democracy function effectively in such a partisan era?"

We believe the answer is yes, but engagement by the American people will be necessary, as has been the case throughout history, to encourage policymakers to solve problems. We come here today with the hope that our democracy will once again be able to respond to national challenges, despite our ideological differences.

We hosted a series "National Conversations on American Unity," to explore the depth of our divisions, their causes, and the effects they have on our government and the confidence of the American people. Over the past 18 months, we have conducted four public forums across the country and, with your input, we have developed more than 60 recommendations and reforms contained in this report that will allow our political system to operate more effectively.

Americans can work together while holding true to their principles, because collectively we believe in the sanctity of our nation. Above all else, as George Washington said, "The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations."

We are here today as Americans with the conviction that our nation, unique in history, can find its way through these difficult times and continue to shine as an example of democracy for the rest of the world.



Tom Daschle



Dan Glickman



Dirk Kempthorne



Trent Lott



Olympia Snowe



**Governance Program**  
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# Executive Summary

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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 leaders 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 concerns 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 recommendations 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 voters to input their own registration 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.

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- 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 leadership 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.
  - 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.

## Congressional Reform

Our second set of recommendations focuses on the institution 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 leaders and be invited by leadership to attend joint congressional caucuses twice a year.

- 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

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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.



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Founded in 2007 by former Senate Majority Leaders Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole and George Mitchell, the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) is a non-profit organization that drives principled solutions through rigorous analysis, reasoned negotiation and respectful dialogue. With projects in multiple issue areas, BPC combines politically balanced policymaking with strong, proactive advocacy and outreach.