



DEMOCRACY REFORM TASK FORCE WEEKLY NEWS ROUND UP

November 17, 2018

NATIONAL NEWS

[Dems Say Their First Bill Focuses On Strengthening Democracy At Home](#)

NPR

Democrats will take control of the U.S. House in January with big items topping their legislative to-do list: Remove obstacles to voting, close loopholes in government ethics law and reduce the influence of political money. Party leaders say the first legislative vote in the House will come on H.R. 1, a magnum opus of provisions that Democrats believe will strengthen U.S. democratic institutions and traditions. "It's three very basic things that I think the public wants to see," said Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.), who spearheads campaign finance and government ethics efforts for the House Democratic Caucus. He said H.R. 1 will "demonstrate that we hear that message loud and clear." But even Sarbanes admits the quick vote is just a first step. Republicans, who control the Senate, are unlikely to pass the bill and President Trump is unlikely to sign it. "Give us the gavel in the Senate in 2020 and we'll pass it in the Senate," Sarbanes said. "Give us a pen in the Oval Office and we'll sign those kinds of reforms into law."

**Related Story: [Democrats Just Won the House. Here's What They Plan to Do First.](#)*

**Related Story: [Democrats' First House Bill Will Address Voter Rights.](#)*

[Voters Are Hungry for Reform: Congress Must Deliver](#)

The Hill

One of the clearest takeaways from election night: Voters want democracy reform. Across the country, citizens voted on a record number of ballot initiatives on issues like redistricting, voting, money in politics, and ethics. More than we have seen in decades, candidates themselves put reform at the center of their campaigns. In the end, voters handed a decisive win to democracy itself. Now that the election is over, Congress must get to work to pass the sweeping changes its members promised and that the American people voted for. Support for democracy reform – making our system of government more representative and responsive – was overwhelming and bipartisan. Redistricting reform won in four states, increased voting access in four, and measures

to strengthen ethics and money in politics regulations in six states and more than a dozen localities, all by large margins. Florida, for example, featured some of the closest statewide races in the nation, but a historic measure to restore voting rights to citizens with past criminal convictions won more than 60 percent of the vote. And in Michigan, where voters were firmly split on candidates for governor and U.S. Senate, 60 percent voted for redistricting reform, and 65 percent for voting reform. To a remarkable degree, calls for reform animated the Democrats' successful push to retake the House of Representatives. The Democrats' promise to make government more "responsive, representative, effective, and transparent" was the centerpiece of their election agenda.

[Momentum Builds for Dems to Take On Campaign Finance Reform](#)

The Hill

Momentum is building within the House Democratic Caucus to move aggressively on campaign finance reform next year after candidates promised the issue would be at the center of their agenda if they took back the majority.... Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.), who has taken a lead role in pushing campaign finance reform, said in a statement to The Hill that Democrats will introduce a reform package as soon as the new Congress takes office. Sarbanes is among a handful of returning Democrats in the House who have sworn off corporate PAC money, according to End Citizens United. "On the first day of the new Congress, Democrats will introduce a bold and sweeping democracy reform package that will end the dominance of big money in our politics," he said. Democrats say the package, which will extend beyond campaign finance reform, is likely to include two bills on the issue. One piece of legislation would be Sarbanes's Government by the People Act, which proposes a small-donor matching system for federal candidates. Under the proposal, donations of up to \$150 would be matched by a contribution of public funds at a six-to-one ratio.

[The Anti-Corruption Congress](#)

Center for American Progress

This year, the incoming House of Representatives is poised to pass the most sweeping democracy reform legislation since at least the post-Watergate reforms of the 1970s. On November 6, Democratic candidates won a wave election to retake control of the House, in part by running on a platform of curbing Washington's culture of corruption. Democratic leaders in the House, including House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD), and Rep. John Sarbanes (D-MD), the head of the House Democracy Reform Task Force, have made clear that one of their first legislative priorities will be to pass changes to campaign finance, ethics, and voting rules. They will do so with the overwhelming backing of the House Democratic caucus, including a substantial number of new members who campaigned on the need to reject special interests and restore public faith in American democracy. As the chart below shows, close to half of the members in the entering House have already committed, on the record, to following through on that message by passing a series of major reforms.

[The Growing Prevalence of Dark Money](#)

POLITICO Morning Score

This cycle alone, secret-money political groups that don't disclose donors spent at least \$98 million — and that's only what was reported to the FEC so far — according to data from Anna Massoglia, a researcher at the Center for Responsive Politics. So-called dark money groups will cross the \$1 billion threshold for spending during the 2020 cycle, said Michael Beckel, the manager of research, investigations and policy analysis at Issue One. He blamed the 2010 Citizens United case for opening the floodgates for this kind of spending.... Advocates have proposed several different routes for changing dark money spending and disclosure — through the courts, agency action or Congress, where the new Democratic House majority wants to make campaign finance legislation a priority.

[Investigations Are Coming: Dems Will Prioritize Government Ethics](#)

Salon

Shortly after Democrats won the majority in the House of Representatives, Ronald Klein, writing for the Washington Post, beat the competition in offering the worst hot take, arguing that “a Democratic majority charging out of the gate with investigative hearings would be making a mistake” and that Democrats should instead “deliver on kitchen-table issues” such as improving health care, raising the minimum wage and improving infrastructure. This was a bad take not just because of Klein's shockingly naive inability to understand that Senate Republicans and Donald Trump will laugh at any attempts to shame them for killing any such bills. He's also wrong about the politics of the moment. Yes, voters want health care and more money in their pockets; voters always want that. But the reason this election saw the highest voter turnout for a midterm since 1966 is not because those needs are more pressing than ever, but because Democratic voters feel a sense of urgency about the unparalleled corruption of the Trump administration.... There's a “desire of the everyday Americans to get their voice back,” Rep. John Sarbanes, a Maryland Democrat, told me on the phone Thursday. He said the newly elected first-time congressional representatives report that their constituents want restoring democracy and accountability to government to be a top-line priority once the Democratic majority is gavelled in. Sarbanes intends to lead the way by introducing a bill that would shore up the Voting Rights Act, closes some loopholes in ethics laws and regulate campaign finance more strictly. He says he has the support of Democratic leadership and plans for this bill to be the first one offered in the 2019 legislative session.

[It's Time to Fix American Elections — Again](#)

The American Prospect

Given that a record 113 people cast ballots in this midterm, the voting system breakdowns plaguing this election could arguably have been worse. But as the messy contested elections in Florida and Georgia demonstrate, the business of voting in America remains deeply flawed.... House Democrats have made election system improvements a centerpiece of HR 1, a bill to strengthen democracy that they have pledged to pass in their first 100 days in the majority come January. The legislation also sets out to close ethics loopholes and reduce the influence of big money in politics. Senate Republicans, of course, are unlikely to go along. Nevertheless, the election system is overdue for an overhaul on the scale of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), which approved federal standards and funding for voting after the contested 2000 presidential race pulled the curtain back on the nation's balkanized and erratic election infrastructure. Meaningful legislation would include elements of House Democrats' proposal, including automatic voter registration, but would also ban conflicts of interest in election administration, invest substantially in new machines, and protect voters nationwide from discriminatory purges and other suppression tactics.

IN THE STATES

[Public Campaign Financing Won Big on Tuesday](#)

Next City

Voters in cities across the country approved ballot initiatives that expand or create public campaign financing systems, in an attempt to limit the influence of big donors, Governing reports. Denver voters passed Measure 2E, with 69 percent of the vote, Denverite said. 2E caps the amount of money candidates can accept from a single donor and bans corporate contributions in exchange for a city-funded match at 9 to 1, the site said. Essentially, that means a \$50 donation becomes a \$500 donation.... Baltimore voters widely supported a measure to create a "Fair Elections Fund," which would match public funds for small-dollar donations. The city council must design the fund and system to come into effect in time for the 2024 elections, the Baltimore Sun reported.... New York City voters chose to expand its public campaign finance program, lowering contribution limits and boosting matching funds from a 6-1 ratio to an 8-1 ratio. The New York Times endorsed the proposal, saying the changes would "be likely to help blunt the impact of large donations, and encourage more candidates to run for office." The new changes become optional in 2021 and mandatory in 2022, the Times said.

**Related Story: [Denver Voters Vote in Favor of Clean Campaigns.](#)*

[Democrats Poised to Wipe Out Republicans North Carolina's Gerrymander](#) **Slate**

North Carolina Republicans have spent the last eight years ruthlessly undermining democracy in their state. The key to their extraordinary success is a series of partisan gerrymanders that dilute the power of Democrats' vote, allowing the GOP to maintain a firm grasp on the state legislature. But Republicans failed to subvert the one institution capable of reversing this damage to fair representation: the state judiciary. Now voting rights advocates are poised to score a legal victory in North Carolina that could wipe out the GOP's legislative gerrymander—with the help of civil rights attorney Anita Earls, who was elected to the state Supreme Court last week. The case could give Democrats a real shot at retaking the legislature in 2020, or at least contesting it on an even playing field.

KEY OPINION

[Dems Need a Plan Beyond Responding to Trump's Outrage of the Day](#) **Chicago Sun Times (Op-Ed by Jesse Jackson)**

With majority control in the House of Representatives, Democrats have an enormous opportunity — and face a distinct peril. The opportunity is to lay out in hearings and in legislation a long-overdue change agenda for America. The peril is they'll get caught responding to President Trump's outrage a day, focus on pursuing his corruption, his taxes, his payoffs, his fulminations and unending lies. The latter fixates the media. The former serves the American people.... The needs for reform are apparent. Democrats gained popular favor running on extending and defending health care and on democracy reform, including reviving the Voting Rights Act, curbing big money in politics, automatic voter registration, ending gerrymandering and a rollback of the voter suppression techniques that have spread across the country.... Americans did not elect Democrats to harass Donald Trump personally. They elected them to hold his administration accountable to law and to push for reforms that will address the challenges they face in their lives. Yes, Democratic reforms will likely be blocked by a Republican Senate or vetoed by the president. But they can show Americans that there is an alternative, if only Trump and the Republican Senate would get out of the way.

[The Republicans Broke Congress. Democrats Can Fix It.](#) **The New Republic (Column by Norm Ornstein)**

House Democrats are no strangers to governance; even with the influx of newcomers, they have a veteran group who have been in the majority before, many under both divided and united government. But the question of what do we do now is still a pressing one, since the dynamic in today's Washington is unlike any they—and the country—have ever seen. Party

leadership contests will come quickly, followed by the need to draft a rules package that sets out how the House will operate, from floor procedures to ethics considerations. Chairmanships of key committees and subcommittees will need to be settled. And an agenda, substantive and investigatory, should be laid out before the new House convenes on January 3. At the same time, Democrats have to prepare for the possibility of a lame-duck session in which Republicans try to do some mischief, like a resolution on the “caravan,” before they are pushed into the minority. Of course, they will have to begin with the Trump administration, and the business of keeping it from pushing the country closer to autocracy, extending its kleptocratic corruption and the form of government known as kakistocracy (“rule by the worst”). Next comes establishing an agenda and a set of messages that show Americans why they are worthy of the mantle of governance, now and for the presidential contest in 2020.

[Let the People Vote](#)

The New York Times (Column by David Leonhardt)

The United States finally has the pro-democracy movement that it needs. Last week, ballot initiatives to improve the functioning of democracy fared very well. In Florida — a state divided nearly equally between right and left — more than 64 percent of voters approved restoring the franchise to 1.4 million people with felony convictions. In Colorado, Michigan and Missouri, measures to reduce gerrymandering passed. In Maryland, Michigan and Nevada, measures to simplify voter registration passed. “In red states as well as blue states,” Chiraag Bains of the think tank Demos says, “voters overwhelmingly sent the message: We’re taking our democracy back.” Of course, there is still an enormous amount of work to do. Voting remains more difficult here than in almost any other affluent country. On Election Day, I had to wait in line for 45 minutes, even though I have a job that gives me the luxury of voting in the middle of the day. And this country also suffers, unfortunately, from an anti-democracy movement: Leaders of the Republican Party — out of a fear of the popular will — keep trying to make voting harder. They have closed polling places, reduced voting hours and introduced bureaucratic hurdles.

[Redistricting Reform in a Democratic House](#)

Harvard Law Review Blog

Now that Democrats have captured the House, a wide array of policy reforms are suddenly feasible. These reforms won’t become law, of course, since Republicans continue to control the Senate and the Presidency. But the House can still pass them—and thus lay down markers for a future Democratic Congress and show the American public the kinds of ideas that Democrats support. In this post, I want to explore one area where the Democratic House could and should legislate: redistricting reform. Congress has regulated congressional redistricting since the 1840s, so its authority to act in this field isn’t in doubt. The need for Congress to intervene is also undeniable. The current cycle has seen the most severe and the most one-sided gerrymandering in modern American history. And things will only get worse in the 2020 round of redistricting as voters become more partisan and mapmaking technology grows in

sophistication. To start, then, what form should a House bill take? There are three basic options. First, a bill could require state legislatures to use certain criteria when they draw district lines. Second, a bill could both mandate these criteria and compel states to cede control of redistricting to a bipartisan or nonpartisan commission. And third, a bill could impose the criteria, authorize lawsuits to enforce them, and provide a safe harbor from litigation to states that choose to employ commissions.

[American Needs a Bigger House](#)

The New York Times (Editorial)

The House's current size — 435 representatives — was set in 1911, when there were fewer than one-third as many people living in the United States as there are now. At the time, each member of Congress represented an average of about 200,000 people. In 2018, that number is almost 750,000.... There's a solution, which involves adding 158 new seats to the House of Representatives, making it proportionally similar to most modern democracies.... The bottom line is that the House today is far too small, and that poses a big danger to American democracy. For starters, how does a single lawmaker stay in touch with the concerns of three-quarters of a million people? The answer is she doesn't.... Second, the cap on the number of House members leads to districts with wildly varying populations.... These discrepancies violate the basic constitutional principle of one-person-one-vote, causing voters to be unequally represented in the chamber that was designed to offset the Senate, where every state gets two seats regardless of population. Third, the size of the House determines the shape of the Electoral College, because a state's electoral votes are equal to its congressional delegation.... Most important, expanding the House would mean not just a government with more representatives, but one that is literally more representative — including more people from perennially underrepresented groups, like women and minorities.

**Related Editorial: [A Bigger House Is a Bad Idea](#).*

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