



What States Can Do to Fight Corruption and Empower Voters

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Americans should be governed by elected officials who represent them. All too often, however, the public's concerns—from health care to wages to the environment—take a back seat to the concerns of the corporations and superrich Americans who bankroll political campaigns. To add insult to injury, many elected officials, rather than working to unrig the system, have tried to insulate themselves from accountability by making it harder for citizens to vote and locking them out of the political process.

This system is fundamentally corrupt, and Americans are tired of it.¹ They are looking for state and local leaders who have the courage to be part of the solution. Below are several ideas that can help state leaders tackle corruption, empower voters, and show that they believe in a system that works for everyone.

Ensure that public servants serve the public, not special interests

- **Enact small-donor public financing:** With citizen-funded elections, the big-money, special interest system for funding campaigns is replaced with a small-money system funded by regular people.² For example, Washington, D.C., recently adopted a program in which every \$1 in small contributions to local candidates is matched with \$5 in public funds—in addition to conditional grants—so that candidates can run competitive, citizen-powered campaigns. Meanwhile, Seattle has implemented a democracy voucher system that lets everyone contribute to campaigns by providing each resident with four \$25 vouchers to support local candidates. Such systems allow candidates to run for office without kowtowing to Wall Street bankers or K Street lobbyists; the only support they need is from the residents of their district.
- **Enhance disclosure in order to expose big donors:** In recent elections, a shadow campaign has been waged outside of the official campaigns of candidates. Big donors have set up dark money organizations—political groups disguised as social welfare nonprofits in order to spend big money while keeping their donors anonymous.³ States can crack down on this secret spending by strengthening disclosure laws.⁴ For example, California has already taken steps in this direction by enacting the DISCLOSE Act and, more recently, the Social Media DISCLOSE Act.⁵

- **Ban lobbyist fundraising:** In most states, there are limits on how much money any one individual can give to a political campaign. But special interest lobbyists go around these limits by raising money from deep-pocketed clients and colleagues and then handing whole stacks of checks to politicians. This practice simply shouldn't be allowed. At least nine states already restrict or prohibit lobbyist fundraising; others should follow suit.⁶

Make voting accessible to all Americans and make every vote count

- **Enact automatic voter registration:** One of the main deterrents to voting in the United States is the often confusing process of voter registration—one that few other democracies make citizens endure.⁷ Fortunately, there is a growing movement to enact automatic voter registration (AVR).⁸ More than one-quarter of Americans now live in a jurisdiction with AVR, but any state that has not yet enacted AVR should also be working to make it a reality.
- **Restore citizens' voting rights:** Nationwide, millions of Americans convicted of a crime, including minor offenses, have been stripped of the right to vote despite having served their sentence. There is no reason why these individuals—or other individuals involved with the justice system, such as those awaiting trial—should continue to be denied the most fundamental right of citizenship. Vermont and Maine are the only two states that do not disenfranchise any individuals with criminal convictions.⁹ However, many states have taken steps to allow more citizens to reclaim their right to vote.¹⁰
- **Improve election security:** In 2016, Americans had to contend not only with moneyed interests and restrictions on their rights to vote, but with a new kind of corruption: a foreign power trying to change the outcome of U.S. elections.¹¹ States urgently need to take steps to ensure that, in all future elections, votes are properly counted and that the final tally reflects the actual votes cast.¹² Such steps include implementing strong cybersecurity protections for election infrastructure such as voter registration systems; requiring voter-verified paper ballots; replacing old voting machines; and conducting fast and effective audits of election results.
- **End partisan gerrymandering:** Even when voters do exercise their rights, their choices are often manipulated by politicians that draw their own districts to maximize partisan advantage. States have begun to take steps to address this problem; a significant number now give independent commissions, instead of incumbent legislators, the power to draw districts.¹³ Furthermore, Missouri recently became the first state to incorporate into its redistricting process an initiative to ensure that the makeup of its Legislature fairly reflects the political views of the public.¹⁴ Other states should incorporate this important step into their own efforts.

Endnotes

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- 4 Center for American Progress, “Bold Ideas for State Action” (2018), p. 43, available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2018/05/10084555/StateAction-pdf>.
- 5 Richard B. Newman, “Governor Brown Signs Social Media DISCLOSE Act,” *The National Law Review*, September 27, 2018, available at <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/governor-brown-signs-social-media-disclose-act>.
- 6 The nine states that already restrict or prohibit lobbyist fundraising are Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Carolina. See Alaska Department of Administration, “Chapter 24.45. Regulation of Lobbying: § 24.45.121(a)(8),” available at http://doa.alaska.gov/apoc/pdf/2009_24_45.pdf (last accessed January 2019); Arizona State Legislature, “§ 41-1234.01(A),” available at <https://www.azleg.gov/viewdocument?docName=https://www.azleg.gov/ars/41/01234-01.htm> (last accessed January 2019); Office of Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold, “Part 3 Regulation of lobbyists: § 24-6-308(1)(l),” available at https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/info_center/laws/Title24/Title24Article6Part3.html#a24-6-308 (last accessed January 2019); Connecticut General Assembly, “Chapter 155, Elections: Campaign Financing: § 9-610(e)(1),” available at https://www.cga.ct.gov/2017/pub/chap_155.htm#sec_9-610 (last accessed January 2019); Justia, “2014 Kentucky Revised Statutes: § 6.811(5),” available at <https://law.justia.com/codes/kentucky/2014/chapter-6/section-6.811> (last accessed January 2019); FindLaw, “Maryland Code, General Provisions § 5-715(d)(1),” available at <https://codes.findlaw.com/md/general-provisions/md-code-gen-provis-sect-5-715.html> (last accessed January 2019); Justia, “New Mexico Statutes: § 2-11-8.1(B),” available at <https://law.justia.com/codes/new-mexico/2015/chapter-2/article-11/section-2-11-8.1/> (last accessed January 2019); Justia, “2014 Oklahoma Statutes: § 21-187.1(G),” available at <https://law.justia.com/codes/oklahoma/2014/title-21/section-21-187.1/> (last accessed January 2019); South Carolina Legislature, “South Carolina Code of Laws Unannotated: § 2-17-80(A),” available at <https://www.scstatehouse.gov/code/t02c017.php> (last accessed January 2019). For more on banning lobbyist fundraising, see Center for American Progress, “Ban Lobbyists from Fundraising for Politicians” (Washington: 2018), available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2018/04/25080206/TausanovitchLobbyingFundraising-factsheet11.pdf>.
- 7 Jennifer S. Rosenberg and Margaret Chen, “Expanding Democracy: Voter Registration Around the World” (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2009), available at <https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/publications/Expanding.Democracy.pdf>.
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