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Ten Ways to Strengthen American Democracy

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The current level of dysfunction in Washington is like nothing we could have imagined when we began our journeys in public service. Yet we are convinced, based on our decades of experience encompassing the legislative and executive branches, that the status quo of today need not constitute the new normal of tomorrow.

As such, on Tuesday, as part of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Commission on Political Reform, we released more than 60 concrete and achievable recommendations that will improve the federal government's ability to function regardless of the deep ideological divides that exist both among lawmakers and the American public, while addressing some of the root causes of the polarization.

What are some politically realistic reforms that could significantly improve the way we govern? Here are

10 key ideas to fix the electoral process, return Congress to legislating and enhance public service.

1. Increase voter participation in primaries

Only 20 percent of eligible voters vote in congressional primaries. The commission recommends that states and political parties aim for 30 percent by 2020 and 35 percent by 2026. Rather than a yearlong process that confuses voters, we recommend a single June congressional primary date, more open primaries and eliminating congressional caucuses and conventions.

2. Balance access and integrity in our elections

We recommend that states use the data revolution to (1) identify eligible, unregistered voters and offer them the opportunity to register and (2) greatly improve the accuracy of voter rolls.

3. Ensure a fair process for drawing congressional districts

To reduce distrust between the two parties, we urge the adoption of redistricting commissions with the bipartisan support of state legislatures and the electorate, to avoid the kind of single-party gerrymandering that has contributed to political polarization.

4. Tackle money in politics

All political contributions, including those made to outside and independent groups, should be disclosed. Congress should also pass legislation requiring detailed disclosure of spending by congressional leadership PACs and mandate that those funds be used solely for political activities, not personal use.

5. Reform the filibuster and Senate debate

Eliminate the ability to filibuster the motion to proceed; in other words, don't allow filibusters on whether to move to debate a bill. And, at the same time, guarantee a minimum number of 10 amendments, split between the majority and minority, on each bill debated.

6. Empower congressional committees

Legislation should go through the full committee and amendment processes to avoid power in Congress being too centralized. By strengthening the role of congressional committees, we will create fertile soil for consensus building across the aisle.

7. Spend more time legislating in Washington — and with one another

The House and Senate should schedule synchronized, five-day workweeks in Washington, with three weeks in session followed by one-week recesses. The president and congressional leadership should hold regular monthly meetings, and the president should attend biannual joint caucuses.

8. Adopt a biennial budget cycle

To avoid the annual clash over the budget and ensure better oversight and long-term thinking, Congress should adopt a two-year cycle for budget and appropriations. The

current annual budgeting process is badly broken — as crisis after crisis has shown over the past few years.

9. Create an expectation to serve

We encourage a year of service for Americans ages 18 to 28, and recommend greatly improving the opportunities to serve in programs like AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps, to run for political office or to serve in appointed office. This would fulfill Americans' enthusiasm to give back.

10. Improve the presidential appointments process

The onerous appointments process discourages many of the most qualified applicants. We recommend cutting back on unnecessary restrictions to serve, streamlining the financial disclosure process, reducing the number of positions requiring Senate confirmation and encouraging the private sector to allow employees to take a temporary position in government.

There is no magic wand for making government work again. Yet indisputably, there are many measures that we can, and must, undertake. Divided government need not, and must not, mean *dysfunctional* government. After all, Americans are a can-do people, and we deserve to be governed that way.

Former Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) and former Agriculture Secretary and Rep. Dan Glickman (D-Kan.) co-chair the Bipartisan Policy Center's Commission on Political Reform. To learn more about this report and the related Citizens for Political Reform effort, visit www.bipartisanpolicy.org/CPR.