



Moving Forward Together

A transpartisan agenda to rebuild trust and tackle America's biggest challenges

U.S. PIRG



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Research Group



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Frontier Group provides information and ideas to build a healthier, more sustainable America. Our experts and writers

deliver timely research and analysis that is accessible to the public, applying insights gleaned from diverse fields of knowledge to arrive at new ideas for solving pressing problems. We address the problems that emerge, paradoxically, from our nation's material and technological wealth and seek to ensure a future in which all people and all of our children can live healthy and meaningful lives.

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Executive summary

The 2020 election confirms it: Americans are more divided than at any time in recent history. Our increasing polarization makes it difficult for our government to produce results on behalf of the public – or even for Americans of differing political views to have civil conversations.

Paradoxically, however, this moment of heightened polarization also contains the seeds of renewal. With political coalitions increasingly entrenched and splitting the country nearly down the middle, our nation’s leaders face a stark choice: Continue down the path of gridlock and total political warfare, or begin to carve out a space where people of both parties can work together on behalf of the public interest.

The good news is that there are a surprising number of public policies on which Republicans, Democrats and independents share common ground. By daring to venture out across political “no man’s land” and forge compromise on areas of public concern, lawmakers can get important work done for the American people even as they begin to create a pathway out of the nation’s dangerous and counterproductive polarization.

This paper outlines 12 areas of policy where the potential exists for real reforms that bridge the partisan divide and restore Americans’ faith and trust in one another and in their government.

- 1) **Infrastructure** – A national infrastructure bank has been proposed by both Democrats and Republicans as a tool to unlock investment in the nation’s crumbling and outdated infrastructure.
- 2) **National service** – Republicans and Democrats have supported proposals for an expansion of national service – creating new opportunities for Americans of all backgrounds to work together to better our communities.
- 3) **Broadband internet** – Lack of access to broadband internet impedes the ability of children to learn during a time of pandemic and of rural communities to thrive in the 21st century economy. Public broadband can be a solution.
- 4) **Climate change** – Young Americans – including young conservatives – are increasingly alarmed about global warming as climate impacts become more severe and apparent, opening the door to forge bipartisan agreement on specific policies around the edges of the climate debate and build toward larger solutions.
- 5) **Career and technical education** – The nation has a growing need for training for so-called “mid-skill” jobs accessible to those without a college education. Revitalizing

career and technical education can help prepare a broader range of young people for success in today's economy.

- 6) **Gun safety** – Gun rights are among the most polarizing issues in America, but the vast majority of Americans agree that specific measures to keep guns out of the hands of potentially dangerous people are necessary and appropriate.
- 7) **Cutting wasteful spending** – Progressives and conservatives often disagree about the size and role of government, but there are some government programs and tax breaks that simply don't make sense. Cutting wasteful programs can save money at a time of growing fiscal challenges.
- 8) **Government transparency** – Transparency and accountability are imperative to restoring trust in government. Bipartisan reforms can improve citizen access to information about government spending and impose accountability on public officials.
- 9) **Citizen engagement with government spending** – In a growing number of communities, citizens are entrusted with directly deciding how a portion of their tax dollars are spent. The adoption of participatory budgeting or the expansion of the current income tax check-off system could provide new ways for citizens to engage with government.
- 10) **Empowering citizens in elections** – Americans are sick and tired of expensive elections bankrolled by wealthy special interests. Policies such as tax credits or matching grants for small political contributions can help even the scales between big and small donors.
- 11) **Right to repair** – From smartphones to farm equipment, manufacturers often make it difficult or impossible for consumers to fix the things they own. "Right to repair" legislation can expand freedom for individuals and counter the power of the tech industry.
- 12) **Clean energy** – Tax credits for wind and solar power are broadly popular and have helped spark the dramatic growth of renewable energy. There is broad bipartisan support for extending the tax credits, providing a firm foundation for continued recovery of renewable energy after the COVID-19 pandemic.

These areas of potential bipartisan cooperation are just the tip of the iceberg. From rebuilding our public health system to handle pandemics to addressing the plague of opioid addiction; from replacing lead water pipes in our cities to protecting precious lands and clear streams in the wilderness; and from reforming our antitrust laws to reforming our criminal justice system, America has no shortage of critical challenges we need to face. By identifying areas of potential common ground and then getting to work to enact solutions in those areas, the nation can begin to face up to its challenges.

Introduction

Americans are more divided than we have been in living memory.

Not that we haven't disagreed on things before. Diversity of opinion has always been one of our nation's great strengths – it's the fertile ground from which new ideas grow.

What's happening today is different. In the past, when we've disagreed, most of us still recognized the other side as acting for what they believed was in the best interests of the country. "The average American used to feel positive about their own party and kind of neutral about the opposite party," said Stanford University researcher Matthew Gentzkow, part of a team that recently studied trends in political polarization across Western countries.¹ "But now they are positive about their party and quite negative about the opposing party."

"Democrats and Republicans both say that the other party's members are hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialize across party lines," according to another 2019 study of polarization.²

The effects of this deepening polarization are all around us. Republicans and Democrats increasingly live in different places, consume different media, buy different products, watch different sports – in essence, they exist in different realities from one another. Every issue – even such seemingly universal ones as the response to a deadly pandemic – gets filed into one or another partisan box.

And so, a government that once served as the vehicle through which Americans came together to win world wars, build monumental works of infrastructure, clean our air and water of industrial pollution, lift communities from the depths of poverty and deprivation, and promote the cause of human freedom increasingly fails to perform even its most basic functions.

The system of checks and balances devised by the Founding Fathers and refined by tradition over the centuries requires that major decisions achieve a threshold of consensus from across the nation's diverse range of constituencies. That system often works slowly. Sometimes it is slower than is necessary. But when it does work, it yields change that is durable, broadly supported by the public, and profound enough to address the nation's biggest, most difficult problems.

Today, however, partisan polarization makes achieving consensus – or even enacting compromise – next to impossible. The division of Americans into warring political camps, the nationalization of congressional elections, and the rising threat of primary challenges mean that members of Congress have more to gain politically by catering to the extremes of their own party than by reaching out across partisan lines.

The result is a system that treats sharing credit for legislative accomplishments as “giving the other side a win.” A system in which compromise – the heart and soul of effective legislating – becomes a political liability. A system that transforms the U.S. Congress from a deliberative body working to advance the interests of the public into a theater of total political war.

The only time that anything really gets done, it seems, is when one party controls all of government. The achievement of a “trifecta” – control of the presidency, House and Senate – is seen as the ultimate vindication of a party’s vision, and a chance to pursue all of its political hopes and dreams without restraint and without the need to engage the minority party.

But the legislation passed via these single-party votes is often only temporary. Without even token bipartisan support, signature legislative initiatives come under attack immediately when control of Congress changes – something that happens with increasing frequency.

In the last 26 years, since the election of 1994, control of the House or the Senate has changed nine times.³ In contrast, over the previous 26 years (from 1968 to 1994), control of a house of Congress changed only twice.⁴ Indeed, over the last 11 elections, the composition of American government – control of the presidency, Senate or House – has changed after all but two: the re-elections of George W. Bush in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2012.

[I]t would be much easier if we could all continue to think in traditional political patterns ... It would be more comfortable to continue to move and vote in platoons, joining whomever of our colleagues are equally enslaved by some current fashion, raging prejudice or popular movement. But today this nation cannot tolerate the luxury of such lazy political habits. ... We shall need compromises in the days ahead, to be sure. But these will be, or should be, compromises of issues, not of principles. We can compromise our political positions, but not ourselves.

John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*

Over and over, it seems, when Americans fill out our ballots, we don't vote *for* one party so much as we vote *against* the other. And with government functioning so poorly, that's understandable.

But when we look beneath the division and anger of our current politics, beneath the dysfunction of our governing institutions, a surprising truth emerges: Americans actually agree on quite a lot.

What we need most right now, at this moment, is a kind of patriotic grace – a grace that takes the long view, apprehends the moment we're in, comes up with ways of dealing with it, and eschews the politically cheap and manipulative. That admits affection and respect. That encourages them. That acknowledges that the small things that divide us are not worthy of the moment; that agrees that the things that can be done to ease the stresses we feel as a nation should be encouraged, while those that encourage our cohesion as a nation should be supported.

Peggy Noonan, *Patriotic Grace: What it Is and Why We Need it Now*

From clean energy to campaign finance, from gun safety to infrastructure, public opinion polling consistently reveals ample common ground – places where Democrats, Republicans and independents generally agree on specific policies to address significant problems.

America's newly elected leaders have a choice: Pursue policies and politics that deepen our divisions. Or find ways to work together across partisan lines to show Americans that government can work again.

Cooperation and compromise across party lines is among the very best traditions of American politics. Bipartisan agreement broke the logjam on civil rights legislation in the 1960s; laid the foundation for America's major environmental laws in the 1970s; forged tax reform in the 1980s; enacted the Americans with Disabilities Act in the 1990s; and led to the passage of campaign finance reform legislation in the 2000s.⁵ Democrats and Republicans have come together time and time again to address the nation's biggest challenges.

Working together on specific legislation also builds understanding and trust that, over time, can erode toxic polarization. Research shows that increasing one's contact with members of another group is a consistently effective way to reduce prejudice and misunderstanding.⁶ By partnering on a shared agenda, Americans of good faith may come to recognize that politics does not have

to be a theater of total war, but can be a venue for actually getting things done that are in the public interest.

This memo describes 12 policy areas where Americans from across the political spectrum have an opportunity to work together to get results. The ideas discussed here are not necessarily “bipartisan” in the sense that they enjoy broad support from politicians of both parties. Indeed, some of them only have limited support among politicians of *either* party. All of them, however, are areas in which a significant portion of rank-and-file Democrats, Republicans and independents share common ground.

In many cases, the common ground that exists is relatively narrow. Just because, for example, Democrats and Republicans share views on policies to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous individuals doesn’t mean they agree on the meaning of the Second Amendment or the ideal role of guns in society.

But it is precisely by working together to implement change in narrow areas of agreement that our government can begin to get its transpartisan “muscles” working again and lay a pathway toward addressing the deep and significant challenges facing the nation.

12 opportunities for transpartisan cooperation

1. Creating a national infrastructure bank
2. Expanding national service
3. Expanding broadband access
4. Building common ground on climate change
5. Revitalizing career and technical education
6. Improving gun safety
7. Cutting wasteful and damaging government spending
8. Improving government transparency and accountability
9. Giving citizens a voice in government spending
10. Empowering citizens in elections
11. Enabling consumers to fix the stuff they own
12. Fueling the growth of clean energy

The problems of the 21st century are too great to meet with dysfunctional government. They require too much long-term commitment to solve with policy that swings from one extreme to another every two to four years. Restoring the capability of Americans to work together – and of our government to work, period – is the biggest challenge America faces, and one that is essential to resolving all our other challenges.

Creating a national infrastructure bank

Describing American infrastructure as “crumbling” has become almost clichéd, but the label sticks. Lack of action on trillions of dollars’ worth of deferred projects puts our roads, bridges, power lines, transit systems, water systems and other critical infrastructure at risk. Over 1,680 high-hazard dams in the U.S., for example, are rated in poor or unsatisfactory condition, and notable failures have occurred in recent years in Michigan and California.⁷

Americans are united in their support for greater focus on infrastructure. Public opinion polls consistently show that an overwhelming majority of Americans of both political parties support a program of ambitious investment in infrastructure.⁸

Our country’s current system of financing infrastructure projects – largely developed in the mid- to late 20th century – is ill-equipped to handle the country’s varied and long-term needs.

The federal government continues to prioritize funding for politically popular new infrastructure projects even as states struggle to maintain the infrastructure built by previous generations. Infrastructure programs representing 20th century priorities – such as highway expansion – receive ample funding, even as key 21st century infrastructure priorities such as rural broadband, clean energy infrastructure, and enhancing the climate resilience of coastal areas go underfunded. And when major infrastructure proposals do start gaining momentum in Congress, they usually stall out the minute the discussion turns to how to pay for them.

The nation’s failure to bring its infrastructure program into the 21st century poses a serious threat to our future. For example, it has been clear for nearly a decade – since 2012’s Superstorm Sandy – that the century-old rail tunnel connecting New York City and New Jersey requires major, urgent rehabilitation work, while a second tunnel is needed to serve demand on the line. The tunnel is one of the most critical pieces of rail infrastructure in the nation, carrying 800,000 riders per day and serving as the main passenger connection on the East Coast.⁹

Yet, in 2018, a bipartisan, \$900 million spending proposal for the Gateway Tunnel was abruptly cancelled after President Trump told Congress he would shut down the government rather than sign off on the funding due to a perceived feud with Sen. Charles Schumer – an example of the ways in which political hyperpolarization and outdated infrastructure programs conspire to make construction of necessary infrastructure difficult.¹⁰

One option that has been proposed to address the problem is the creation of a national infrastructure bank. The concept is simple: The federal government would provide seed capital

to the bank, enabling lending of multiple times the initial capital investment to facilitate either public or private infrastructure construction. The funds would then be paid back over time, thereby providing capital for the next round of loans.

Infrastructure banks are not new in the United States. Clean water state revolving loan funds, for example, have financed more than \$100 billion in water infrastructure projects since 1987.¹¹ Similar loan funds for energy and transportation projects are present in many states as well.

A national infrastructure bank would extend the concept to include more types of infrastructure projects focused on national priorities. A national infrastructure bank could finance more complex projects – including projects left out of current federal or state infrastructure funding streams – as well as projects that involve multiple states. It could also combine public and private capital, expanding the potential for private funding of critical infrastructure projects at a time when governments face acute budget challenges.

National infrastructure bank proposals at the federal level have garnered bipartisan support. The Partnership to Build America Act was first introduced in 2013 with 25 cosponsors from each party. It would have created an American Infrastructure Fund, capitalized with \$50 billion of private investment that could be leveraged to provide \$750 billion of financing capability.¹²

The National Infrastructure Bank Act of 2020, introduced by Rep. Danny Davis, Democrat of Illinois, would create a new public bank with over \$4 trillion in lending capacity in order to facilitate infrastructure investments, including high-speed railroads, public housing, expanded broadband, flood protection and a smart electric grid.¹³ It currently has three cosponsors, all Democrats.¹⁴ The cities of Trenton, Pittsburgh and Akron, the National Association of Counties, and the Virginia AFL-CIO have all passed resolutions endorsing the measure.¹⁵

A competing proposal, the Infrastructure Bank for America Act of 2020, was introduced by Florida Republican Rep. Daniel Webster, and has six cosponsors.¹⁶ Rather than a public bank focused on lending to state and local governments, this would be a federally chartered but privately owned, managed and funded wholesale bank that would provide roughly \$1 trillion in lending capacity.¹⁷

To conservatives, an infrastructure bank allows for the potential of private sector participation in infrastructure financing, and creates a structure with greater fiscal accountability than direct government grants. Infrastructure banks can be budget neutral – or even return revenues to the government – requiring no new federal debt or taxes.

Progressives may find appeal in the ability to create more high-paying jobs and expand infrastructure spending faster than can be achieved under traditional federal infrastructure programs. New sources of capital for infrastructure investment will also be essential to projects such as those envisioned as part of efforts to address climate change.

In the days of Andrew Jackson, a national bank divided the country, but today a national infrastructure bank could be a powerful tool to unite it.

Expanding national service

There is a lot of work to do in American communities – repairing streets and sidewalks, building trails and cleaning parks, taking care of the elderly and teaching children, and preparing our communities for disasters and a changing climate. What if we could do some of that critical work while also repairing the bonds that tie us to our fellow citizens? That is the promise of an ambitious expansion of national service.

America has a long history of civilian national service. The first large-scale programs were created during President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, when programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) employed millions of young men and made much of America’s public land accessible to the public. In the 1960s, new service programs gave Americans opportunities to improve communities at home and abroad through VISTA and the Peace Corps.

In recent history, national service has drawn strong, bipartisan support. President George H.W. Bush signed the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1990, which created the Commission on National and Community Service. Under his leadership, a bipartisan group of senators drafted legislation creating the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC).

That legislation, the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, was introduced by a bipartisan coalition and signed by President Bill Clinton. It also created AmeriCorps, which has gone on to involve more than 1 million men and women who have provided more than 1.4 billion hours of service.¹⁸ President George W. Bush expanded AmeriCorps and created the USA Freedom Corps to “strengthen the American culture of service.”¹⁹

In 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which passed the Senate by a 79-19 vote.²⁰ After making a call for national service legislation in a late February address to Congress, the bill was quickly written, debated and passed, reaching his desk five weeks later.²¹ The legislation increased funding and authorized AmeriCorps to grow

from 75,000 to 250,000 positions each year.²² Despite President Trump's repeated attempts to eliminate the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), which manages AmeriCorps, Republicans and Democrats in Congress have instead funded modest increases in funding for CNCS, including an increase of \$19 million in FY 2019 and \$21 million in FY 2020.²³

The coronavirus pandemic has spurred renewed interest in national service legislation to provide hope and opportunity in the face of widespread sickness and job losses. One proposal is the Cultivating Opportunity and Response to the Pandemic through Service (CORPS) Act, introduced in the Senate in June 2020 by seven Republicans, six Democrats and an independent.²⁴ This bipartisan legislation would fund AmeriCorps positions for a three-year period, temporarily increase members' living allowance, and prioritize services relating to response and recovery. It would also add flexibility to allow national service programs to respond to local recovery needs. Anecdotal reports suggest that some Republicans in have expressed support for including the CORPS Act in the next COVID relief package.²⁵ The \$16.6 billion CORPS Act would authorize growing the AmeriCorps program to the levels authorized in the Serve America Act of 2009, reaching 250,000 positions over three years.²⁶

The Inspire to Serve Act of 2020, a bipartisan bill introduced by Rep. Jimmy Panetta of California, contains proposals developed by the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. It would expand national service opportunities and access by increasing the AmeriCorps living allowance and education award, creating new service fellowship programs, and mandating a public awareness campaign. The bill would also advance military service by expanding Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) programs, and offer scholarships to promote public service.²⁷

The 21st Century Conservation Corps for Our Health and Our Jobs Act was introduced by Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon. It calls for \$9 billion for the Department of Labor to establish a modern CCC program, with an emphasis on preventing wildfires by restoring public lands and watersheds.²⁸ President Donald Trump has called for improved forest "cleaning" to prevent the intensity of wildfires, and this bill envisions a conservation corps improving resiliency and reducing risk through forest management.²⁹

Expanding national service programs could also help Americans from different regions and backgrounds learn more about one another, helping to break down toxic polarization. A 2017 survey found that 64% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans say they have "just a few" or no close friends who are of the opposite political party.³⁰ Helping Americans to meet people outside of their "bubble" can help build understanding: 87% of AmeriCorps State and National

alumni said their experience helped develop the skill of “listening to other people’s opinions or position on an issue,” with 54% saying it helped a great deal.³¹

Conservatives and progressives have found common ground on national service because it speaks to both groups’ values. Conservatives have traditionally valued work, patriotic sacrifice and solving problems through community action rather than top-down government mandates. After introducing the CORPS Act, Republican Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi wrote, “National service programs are highly effective in meeting local needs. They also save taxpayer dollars by hiring workers for limited periods of time rather than growing government. ... These projects invest in citizens rather than government.”³²

Progressives champion national service as a way to give back to the community, as a vehicle for expanding opportunity, and as a means to improve the health and well-being of the nation. National service can also help to address critical environmental challenges that motivate members of both parties. A revived CCC for example, could help to address the nation’s \$20 billion in deferred maintenance needs on public lands.³³ And workers who spend their formative years working in and for the natural world are likely to sustain an appreciation for it throughout their lives.

National service is an idea whose time has once again arrived. A May 2020 poll (that framed national service as effective community support amidst the coronavirus pandemic) found that “8 in 10 voters support increased funding for national service to help young Americans facing unemployment contribute to our national recovery while they earn a college opportunity and valuable skills for the future.” Supporters included 70% of Republicans and 90% of Democrats.³⁴ Another poll found that 49% of Americans favor *requiring* young adults to serve for a year.³⁵ The conditions are ideal for strong national service legislation that will help rebuild our country and our common purpose as Americans.

Expanding broadband access

Given our national wealth and prosperity, Americans have surprisingly poor access to broadband internet service. Consumers in some areas of the country do not have broadband access at all, while others who do have it experience much slower speeds than are available to customers in other countries. No or inadequate broadband access means that students in these areas may not be able to fully participate in distance learning, workers may struggle to do their jobs from home, and residents who are avoiding in-person activities to avoid contracting COVID-19 are socially isolated because they are unable to participate in virtual events.

Tens of millions of Americans lack access to broadband service. The Federal Communications Commission defines broadband as an internet connection offering download speeds of 25 megabits per second and upload speeds of 3 megabits per second.³⁶ Using this 25/3 standard, an estimated 21 million Americans live in areas that do not have access to broadband.³⁷ According to an analysis by the organization BroadbandNow, an additional 21 million Americans likely do not have broadband access because the FCC's data overstate broadband availability.³⁸ While many of these customers are in rural areas, some are in cities such as Dallas and Chicago.

Even the broadband service available to many in the U.S. is slower than that enjoyed by consumers in other advanced economies. Ten countries, including Romania, South Korea and Hungary, have average broadband speeds faster than the U.S.³⁹ In addition, some advocates argue that the FCC's current 25/3 standard is too slow to meet the needs of many internet users who engage in videoconferencing and other activities that require both rapid upload and download speeds.⁴⁰

And broadband doesn't come cheap in America. The monopoly or duopoly status of broadband providers in many markets results in American consumers paying more for broadband than consumers in other countries and having little or no choice about which provider to use.⁴¹

Different interests have floated a variety of proposals to solve the nation's problems with broadband access, speed and cost. One partial fix that has broad public support is allowing local governments to build broadband networks. According to a Pew Research Center survey in 2017, 70% of Americans believe that local governments should be allowed to create broadband networks for their residents.⁴² Seventy-four percent of Democrats and 67% of Republicans supported the idea of municipal broadband networks.⁴³ A more recent poll asked specifically about federally supported public internet access, something that 60% of respondents supported (74% of Democrats and 55% of Republicans).⁴⁴ Municipal networks could help fill some gaps in coverage.

Already, hundreds of communities across the nation have developed broadband networks for their residents.⁴⁵ For example, 15 cooperatives in North Dakota have built an extensive fiber broadband network, with the result that 77% of rural residents of North Dakota have access to fiber broadband, a greater share than in other states and even in North Dakota urban areas served by private networks.⁴⁶ Urban areas elsewhere in the country have benefited from municipal broadband networks. For instance, the municipal electric utility in Clarksville, Tennessee, has built a fiber optic network that provides internet service to 18,000 customers.⁴⁷

However, 22 states currently limit the ability of municipalities to create public broadband networks.⁴⁸ States with such limitations are estimated to be home to 11 million Americans who lack broadband access.⁴⁹

Congress has the ability to require states to lift their restrictions on local government broadband networks. Legislation introduced in 2020 would prohibit states from restricting municipal ownership or operation of broadband networks.⁵⁰ While allowing municipal broadband networks would not solve all of America's access, speed and cost problems with broadband, it would create another path by which all communities could seek solutions for themselves.

Building common ground on climate change

Global warming is real, and it is a threat to American lives and livelihoods. The rise in global average temperatures of 1.8° F between 1901 and 2016 has resulted in climate changes that are already putting Americans at risk.⁵¹ Sea level rise, more powerful storms, explosive wildfires, record floods, changes to the natural environment, and threats to the ability to grow crops – none of them discriminate between Red states and Blue states. And with further disruptive changes likely to occur – especially if emissions are allowed to continue unchecked – Americans of all ideological stripes are becoming increasingly alarmed about the future.

A 2020 survey by researchers at Yale University found that 54% of Americans are “alarmed” or “concerned” about global warming, up from 41% in 2015. By contrast, the percentage of Americans described as “dismissive” or “doubtful” dropped from 27% in 2015 to 18% in 2020.⁵²

While global warming has been among the most sharply polarized issues in politics over the last decade, there are signs of change. Young conservatives are increasingly worried about climate change: Recent polling of Republicans aged 18-39 shows that 43% think climate change is having some effect on their local community, 49% think the government is doing too little to reduce the effects of climate change, and 79% believe the U.S. should prioritize developing alternative energy sources.⁵³ Republican leaders increasingly recognize climate is an important issue for young people they hope will become their future voters and leaders. House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy, for example, has warned fellow Republicans the GOP is in danger of losing the next generation if it does not act on global warming.⁵⁴

Winning effective action, however, will require overcoming decades of deep partisan polarization. Moments that might have provided an opening for bipartisan cooperation on climate – such as George H.W. Bush's 1988 campaign declaration that he would fight the

greenhouse effect with the “White House effect,” George W. Bush’s 2000 campaign trail promise to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants, and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s 2008 embrace of climate action – have all come to naught, as fossil fuel interests exploited the nation’s partisan fissures to deter action.

The result is that, for decades, legislative action on climate has been limited and administrative action has started and stopped based on which party holds the White House. The Obama administration, for example, raised fuel economy standards and advanced a plan to slash power plant emissions, only to have those standards overturned by the Trump administration.⁵⁵ With time running out to address the climate crisis, climate policy can no longer afford to swing back and forth every two to four years.

There is good reason to believe that durable, transpartisan consensus may be more possible than it has been in the past. The rapidly increasing dangers posed by the climate crisis, coupled with the growing alarm among young conservatives and Republicans representing regions in the crosshairs of sea level rise and other destructive climate impacts, have made it such that global warming can no longer be credibly ignored by either party.

Moreover, in several states, Republicans have begun to stake out leadership roles on climate policy. Of the 10 states participating in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative – the cap-and-invest program for power plant pollution in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states – four are currently represented by Republican governors.⁵⁶ (Note: Virginia is scheduled to join RGGI in January 2021). Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan and Vermont Governor Phil Scott – all Republicans – have been among the leaders in helping to develop the Transportation and Climate Initiative, a regional cap-and-invest program for transportation fuels.⁵⁷

Bipartisan efforts to address global warming issues are also beginning to take place in Washington. Although none passed either chamber, Republican or bipartisan plans introduced in the 116th Congress included efforts to expand U.S. reforestation efforts to promote carbon sequestration;⁵⁸ to reduce leaks of short-lived, but highly potent greenhouse gas pollutants such as fluorinated gases from refrigerators, air conditioners, landfills, and other sources;⁵⁹ and to ease access to existing U.S. carbon trading markets for farmers engaged in emissions-reducing activities.⁶⁰

While these efforts have thus far been confined to the margins of the climate debate, conversation is beginning about more comprehensive solutions. In 2017, the Climate Leadership Council (CLC), led by George P. Schulz and James A. Baker III, and including other senior

Republican and Democratic ex-White House and Federal Reserve officials, released a plan for a national carbon tax that would:

- 1) Impose an economy-wide tax/fee on carbon emissions, beginning at \$40/ton (in 2017 dollars) in 2021 and rising annually at 5% above inflation;⁶¹
- 2) Return net revenues from the tax as equal quarterly dividends to all Americans. The plan projects households would receive approximately \$2,000 in dividends the first year. CLC notes that the Treasury Department estimates the plan will provide a large majority of households with greater dividends than they pay in increased energy costs;⁶²
- 3) Simplify or eliminate many regulations on carbon pollution;⁶³ and
- 4) Adopt a border carbon adjustment to prevent loss of U.S. firm competitiveness and limit carbon “leakage” (the relocation of polluting facilities to countries without carbon regulation).⁶⁴

A January 2019 letter signed by nearly 3,600 U.S. economists from both parties backed the proposal.⁶⁵ An analysis by Resources for the Future projected the CLC plan would cut U.S. carbon dioxide emissions by 51% by 2035 (from a 2005 base).⁶⁶ Another study projected it would generate \$1.4 trillion in investment in innovative energy technologies, create up to 1.6 million new jobs, and produce \$230 billion in revenues the first year, rising to \$340 billion by 2035.⁶⁷

Beyond the Baker-Shultz plan, 11 other carbon pricing plans were introduced in the 116th Congress (2019-21), of which several were bipartisan.⁶⁸ Ten of the bills proposed carbon taxes and one proposed a cap-and-trade system. The plans differed on points such as the proportion of emissions that would be covered, tax levels and rates of increase, which polluting entities would be taxed, and the treatment of existing carbon regulation.⁶⁹ Nearly all included a border tax adjustment. The bills proposed revenues be devoted to household dividends, investment in clean technology and infrastructure, other tax cuts, worker transition assistance, or other uses.⁷⁰ While none of the bills passed, they attracted a breadth of interest that reflected the potential for future bipartisan action.

In short, Democrats, independents and Republicans increasingly recognize that climate change is real, is affecting America now, and requires a policy response. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (65%) say the federal government is doing too little to reduce the effects of global warming.⁷¹

By working together on consensus measures to cut emissions now, and exploring the potential for legislation that can unlock massive emission reductions in the future, lawmakers can reflect

the will of the majority of Americans who are hungry for climate action, and avoid the pitfalls of previous efforts that have failed to deliver sustained momentum toward a clean economy.

Revitalizing career and technical education

The U.S. has a shortage of high-quality, accessible career and technical training options, leaving employers to compete for a limited pool of skilled workers – even as many Americans without college educations who could fill those jobs lack the necessary skills. In many cases, lack of career and technical training also contributes to a wasteful economy in which it is often easier to replace durable goods than to repair them.

The public policy conversation has long elevated the value of a four-year college education and white-collar professions as the pathway to economic success. Yet, today, the fastest-growing jobs in the U.S. are those that require more training than a high-school degree, including “middle-skill” jobs, which are those that do not require a full four-year college education.⁷²

As technology and the nation change, more workers are needed who can run automated industrial equipment, operate computer technology, or provide skilled care to the growing number of elderly Americans. However, too few workers have the necessary training to fill these jobs. In recent years, the number of middle-skill job openings has outstripped the number of middle-skill workers.⁷³

This has several consequences:

- Employers struggle to find skilled workers such as machinists and electricians.⁷⁴ For example, auto repair shops and fleet operators have found it hard to hire technicians.⁷⁵
- Americans who have graduated from high school but do not have a college degree – and who could potentially fill those middle-skill jobs – lack the training to thrive in the economy.
- Repairing durable goods becomes more difficult and more costly, leading to absurd situations in which it becomes cheaper and easier to replace appliances with minor defects than to repair them. Especially during the pandemic, Americans have been unable to find skilled technicians to repair failing household appliances.⁷⁶ As a result, we end up replacing rather than repairing durable goods, increasing wasteful use of resources.

Both Republicans and Democrats have acknowledged that Americans without a college degree are struggling as many manufacturing jobs are automated or moved overseas. Neither party, however, has made career and technical education a priority. President Donald Trump has promoted protectionist trade policies to retain existing manufacturing jobs, though these policies have done little to slow the evolution of the nation’s economy.⁷⁷ The “free college for

all” conversation in the Democratic Party, meanwhile, has focused on increasing the affordability of two-year and four-year degrees and addressing student debt of people who have already graduated.⁷⁸ As a result, the nation spends 25% less on workforce development programs now than it did before the Great Recession.⁷⁹

Americans are strongly supportive of vocational education and trade schools, with 83% of likely voters in a 2019 poll reporting a favorable opinion of such schools. The vast majority of respondents from both parties – 87% of Republicans and 83% of Democrats – viewed these schools favorably.⁸⁰

National leaders have taken some steps to address some of the gaps in career and technical training. For example, in 2014, Congress passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act with bipartisan support to improve the quality of worker retraining programs that aim to help middle-skill workers.⁸¹ More recently, Congress reauthorized the Perkins Act to increase funding for institutions that offer vocational training and hold states accountable to performance outcomes of their training programs.⁸²

There are additional opportunities for bipartisan action to support vocational and trade education in the U.S. Improvements could expand the number of training opportunities and help reduce the cost to students. In particular, Congress should work to make existing vocational training at community colleges even more accessible and affordable. This can ensure solid skills-based training, connections to local employers, and the more robust academic and social supports of the college experience.

Before the pandemic, legislators from both parties were discussing reforming the National Apprenticeship Act to create more openings for training.⁸³ While the parties do not agree on every approach for creating more apprenticeships, they do agree on the need for more workforce training.

Congress also could make it more affordable for students to attend career and technical education programs by renewing the Higher Education Act, which authorizes federal financial aid programs for students and schools.⁸⁴ The Higher Education Act includes the Pell Grant program, which provides need-based funding for students enrolled in postsecondary education, including vocational training programs.⁸⁵ In fall 2019, both the Republican and Democratic proposals for renewing the Higher Education Act included allowing Pell Grants to be used in high-quality vocational training programs in partnership with industry.⁸⁶ The parties differed on whether Pell Grants could be used at for-profit institutions, which have a history of not adequately preparing their graduates for employment in their intended fields.⁸⁷

To help prospective students better understand the costs and benefits of attending career and technical training programs, Congress could improve transparency for higher education costs and outcomes. Congressional leaders from both parties have also supported increased

transparency through proposed legislation such as the College Transparency Act and the Understanding the True Cost of College Act.⁸⁸ With better data collection practices, the Department of Education could report information about student outcomes, such as post-graduation employment and earnings. Armed with this information, prospective students could better evaluate the costs and benefits of attending a particular institution or training program.⁸⁹

Improving gun safety

On the surface, few issues are more polarized and divisive than guns. But scratch the surface and Americans of both parties actually agree on a range of gun safety proposals.

Polling by the Pew Research Center has found that 89% of both Republicans and Democrats believe that people with mental illnesses should be prevented from purchasing guns, while 86% of Democrats and 83% of Republicans support legislation to bar people on federal no-fly lists from purchasing guns.⁹⁰ More than 90% of Democrats and 79% of Republicans are in favor of background checks at private gun sales and gun shows, and 88% of Democrats and 58% of Republicans support creating a federal database to track gun sales.⁹¹

Beyond polling, several new or proposed laws have garnered significant bipartisan support. A recent push for extreme risk protection order laws – which allow for the temporary removal of firearms from those who pose a danger to themselves or others – at the state and federal levels has garnered significant support from both Republicans and Democrats.⁹² A federal extreme risk bill was proposed in 2019 by Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham and Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal, and while the measure is still in the works, 19 states have effectively passed such legislation, including states with Republican-controlled legislatures such as Indiana and Florida.⁹³ Polling shows that 70% of Americans support such measures if the extreme risk protection order is initiated by police, while 77% of Americans support the order if it is initiated by family members.⁹⁴

The Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2019, true to its name, was co-sponsored in the House with five Republican votes and eventually passed in the House with eight Republican votes (though it is unlikely to pass the Senate).⁹⁵ The act mandated background checks for all gun purchases with certain exceptions, including for transfers between families, certain short-term loans, and transfers to prevent bodily harm.⁹⁶ Groups such as Republicans for Integrity, a group of former Republican members of Congress, and grassroots gun safety groups such as Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America support the act.⁹⁷

At the state level, Republican-controlled legislatures in both Kansas and Pennsylvania passed laws to prevent or restrict convicted domestic abusers from possessing firearms in 2018 and 2019, respectively.⁹⁸ Similarly, following the 2018 shooting in Parkland, Florida, the state not only passed an extreme risk protection law, but also, among other provisions, raised the legal age for purchasing guns to 21, prohibited the transfer of guns through licensed dealers until purchasers pass a background check, and prohibited the possession of bump stocks.⁹⁹

Guns are still a highly contested issue in America, but common-sense gun safety measures are broadly supported by the American people and represent an opportunity for Democrats, Republicans and independents to work together in Congress to save lives.

Cutting wasteful and damaging government spending

Every American family faces difficult choices about where and how to spend money. Splurge on a cruise and you might have less money to pay for junior's college education. Go into debt for a car and you may have to cut other spending later if times get tight.

Democrats and Republicans have different priorities when it comes to spending federal tax dollars and have different ideas about the ideal size of government. Economists differ when it comes to the question of how much spending and debt is too much. But while debates over spending and the national debt are often difficult, most of us can agree that wasteful government spending – bridges to nowhere, equipment the military doesn't want, Medicare fraud, and poorly targeted government programs – is a problem. Not only does government waste cost us money, but it also slowly erodes Americans' faith in the effectiveness of government.

Eliminating wasteful and damaging government spending can be a first step in a renewed discussion about how to get a handle on the national debt, which is now at an all-time high.¹⁰⁰ While some argue the U.S. can sustain debt indefinitely, our rapidly rising indebtedness creates risks for the nation's future: higher interest payments reduce national income; increasing government borrowing costs reduce funding for capital investment; and higher inflation, loss of investor confidence in the dollar, and fiscal crisis become more likely.¹⁰¹

Throughout U.S. history, solid fiscal management enabled the government to fund defense, public investment and social spending. Debt spiked in times of war and national crisis, but the government then brought it back under control.¹⁰² The emergencies of the Great Depression and World War II caused the federal deficit to hit 27.5% of GDP in 1943¹⁰³ and the national debt to

hit 118% of GDP by 1946.¹⁰⁴ It took until the 1960s to bring these levels back down. They were climbing again by the 1980s, driven by tax cuts and defense and social spending hikes.¹⁰⁵ The national debt surged to nearly 95% of GDP – \$14.7 trillion – in 2011 after the Great Recession.¹⁰⁶ The debt grew further after Obama and Trump tax cuts, greater Social Security and Medicare spending, and massive COVID-19 recovery spending. As of September, the national debt stood at \$20.3 trillion, and was projected to reach 98% of GDP by the end of the year.¹⁰⁷ The fiscal deficit hit 15.2% of GDP, the highest level since 1945.¹⁰⁸

At least 14 bipartisan efforts have sought since the 1980s to restrain rising national debt.¹⁰⁹ Most have failed. A 1993 Presidential debt-reduction commission only produced an interim report with no recommendations.¹¹⁰ In 2010, President Barack Obama empowered a commission to generate budget-fixing ideas, but the group’s proposed spending caps, expenditure cuts and tax loophole closures went nowhere with Congress or the White House.¹¹¹ The Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011 enforced automatic discretionary spending limits and cuts (sequestration) for fiscal years 2013 to 2021.¹¹² Sequestration was an arbitrary, blunt approach, however, that limited Congress’ ability to assess the value of programs in determining how to cut spending.

The national debt is projected to continue its upward march. Congress ended sequestration with the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019, which increased discretionary spending levels.¹¹³ COVID-19 relief spending boosted debt further.¹¹⁴ Congressional Budget Office projections show that under current trends, as the U.S. population ages, rising Social Security, Medicare and interest payments will drive the debt to 109% of GDP by 2030.¹¹⁵

Growing debt is concerning to the American public. In June 2020, even as they were increasingly focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, 47% of Americans said the size of the national deficit was a “very big problem.”¹¹⁶

The middle of a pandemic is no time to be pinching pennies. But there are opportunities to save money in the short run – and begin a larger conversation about the debt and deficit – by cutting government programs and tax breaks that both parties can agree are unnecessary or wasteful.

In the 2020 report *Toward Common Ground*, the National Taxpayers Union Foundation and the U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund identified over 50 proposals for spending reform with bipartisan potential that, if enacted, would save taxpayers nearly \$800 billion over 10 years.¹¹⁷ A similar long-running effort called *Green Scissors* brought conservative, taxpayer and environmental groups together behind a shared agenda of cuts to federal programs that harm the environment.¹¹⁸

By identifying a set of wasteful programs that can be targeted for cuts, Democrats, Republicans and independents can have a more fruitful conversation about how the federal budget reflects the nation's values and priorities – and begin to rebuild the trust needed to adopt the compromises required to put the nation back on sound fiscal footing.

Improving government transparency and accountability

Transparency is essential in order to build the trust of the American people that the government is working in the public's best interest. Understanding how taxpayer money is spent and having the ability to hold the government accountable for corruption or misuse of funds is fundamental to democracy.

Transparency is particularly critical at a moment when many Americans have been led to believe that the mechanisms of government are being used for partisan purposes. Most of us believe that our fellow Americans have little or no confidence in the federal government, with 68% of respondents in a recent Pew Research Center study agreeing that it is important to repair that public trust.¹¹⁹ According to Transparency International, the U.S. has hit a new low in the global corruption index, a ranking that is determined by both expert assessment and a survey of the public.¹²⁰ While there is no simple solution to guaranteeing transparency across local, state and federal government, efforts to expand government transparency have often garnered bipartisan support from both the public and elected officials.

Citizen concern with government transparency is not new. After World War II, a 1947 poll showed that 59% of respondents believed “the government was keeping too much information from the people.”¹²¹ Public confidence in the government continued to fall into the 1960s, resulting in the passage of the 1966 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which allows the public access to most federal agency records.¹²² FOIA was passed unanimously in the House and was supported by both political parties.¹²³

The 1970s saw a renewed focus on promoting ethics and transparency in government as a result of Watergate, and many new laws were passed in response, including strengthening of FOIA.¹²⁴ Former Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, “If anything is to be learned from our present difficulties, compendiously known as Watergate, it is that we must open our public affairs to public scrutiny on every level of government.”¹²⁵ The public agreed with him: A 1977 poll found 76% of respondents believed the government should be more transparent.¹²⁶

The rise of the digital age in the 1990s created a new horizon for transparency: making government information accessible to the public online.

In 2008, presidential rivals and then-senators Barack Obama and John McCain introduced a bill called the Strengthening Transparency and Accountability in Federal Spending Act to allow the public to search for information on federal financial assistance and expenditures.¹²⁷ While their bill didn't pass, President Obama signed a similar bill into law in 2014: the DATA Act, which passed unanimously through Congress.¹²⁸ The DATA Act made federal spending data more accessible and searchable, mandated that the spending data be published online, and acted as a tool for better oversight.¹²⁹

There are multiple bills currently introduced in Congress that aim to provide a greater degree of transparency in government. Many of them work to make government information not only technically available to the public, but readily accessible, which is only truly accomplished by providing the information online through a centralized, easy-to-search website.¹³⁰ All 50 states and the federal government currently have websites that disclose their expenditures to the public, but there is still a long way to go to provide citizens with ready access to government information.¹³¹

One effort to expand access to critical government documents is the Congressional Budget Justification Transparency Act, which has bipartisan support.¹³² A congressional budget justification is a federal agency's budget request for the upcoming year, with explanations for each expected expense, as well as an evaluation of the current year's spending and performance.¹³³ At the moment, not all federal agencies are required to publish congressional budget justifications online, nor is that information disclosed in a single, easily searched location.¹³⁴ This bill would require federal agencies to make budget justification materials available to the public on a central website.¹³⁵

The Protecting Our Democracy Act was introduced in September 2020 by House Democrats. It includes a variety of transparency and anti-corruption reforms, including protecting inspectors general from political pressure and promoting their ability to investigate the executive branch.¹³⁶ The organization Protect Democracy says that while the bill currently has only Democratic support, many of the provisions have received bipartisan support in the past.¹³⁷

Existing transparency laws also need to be better enforced or reformed to fit today's needs. For example, Demand Progress argues that Congress should reform FOIA, focusing on aspects that affect public access to executive deliberations, and continue to monitor whether government

agencies are complying with the DATA Act.¹³⁸ A 2020 assessment of compliance with the DATA Act by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found continued errors in government agencies' reporting of their data.¹³⁹

None of these transparency reforms are inherently progressive or conservative – and, indeed, the cause of government transparency has historically been championed by politicians on both sides of the aisle, making government transparency and accountability a potential venue for bipartisan progress.

Giving citizens a voice in government spending

Restoring Americans' trust in government could begin with the government putting its trust in people to determine how a portion of their tax money should be spent.

In the U.S. and around the world, governments are turning over key decisions about government spending priorities directly to people, enabling citizens to learn about, engage with, and help to shape the spending of public money – and, by extension, to reconnect with government institutions that often feel distant and beyond their control.

“Participatory budgeting” is one such tool for citizens to shape the expenditure of public funds. The concept began in the late 1980s in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and has since spread around the world. In its most common form, participatory budgeting allocates a portion of the government budget to projects chosen by the people through a deliberative democratic process. While there is no hard and fast template for participatory budgeting, the process usually begins with the solicitation of ideas from members of the community, which are then translated into formal proposals.¹⁴⁰ The proposals are then debated and voted upon, with the winning project or projects receiving funding.

Participatory budgeting has been shown to positively affect citizen engagement and foster trust in government. As Hollie Russon Gilman and Tiago Carneiro Peixoto wrote in a 2017 article for the think tank New America:

By coming together, weighing tradeoffs, and learning about how much things cost, people receive civic education in the most literal, hands-on sense: They learn what it actually takes to decide how the government should spend a city's money. They find out, for instance, that their dream parks project costs much more than they imagined, or that it involves complex coordination across five agencies, or that the city is already working on similar improvements.¹⁴¹

To date, the biggest participatory budgeting program in the United States has been in the city of New York, whose program was launched in 2011 by a bipartisan group of city council members. Today, the process allocates roughly \$35 million in funding annually, with eligible projects limited to capital expenditures.¹⁴² According to the Participatory Budget Project, more than 700 rounds of participatory budgeting – most of them at the local level – have allocated more than a third of a billion dollars in the U.S. and Canada, while attracting participation from more than 700,000 voters.¹⁴³ Globally, there are more than 10,000 participatory budget processes, largely in Europe.¹⁴⁴

Participatory budgeting has historically had bipartisan appeal. To progressives, participatory budgeting gives voice to the priorities of marginalized communities that are often ignored in conventional budgeting processes. Conservatives, meanwhile, have promoted participatory budgeting abroad as a tool to build and strengthen democratic institutions.¹⁴⁵ People of both ideological persuasions can appreciate the creation of a direct conduit for citizen feedback into a budgetary process that progressives often deride as being unresponsive to public needs and conservatives see as facilitating wasteful pork-barrel spending without broad public support.

The United States already empowers taxpayers to direct some funding toward particular causes. Since the early 1970s, federal taxpayers have had the option to direct a portion of their income tax (currently \$3) toward a fund providing public financing for presidential candidates.¹⁴⁶ In 1977, Colorado became the first state to allow taxpayers to make an additional charitable contribution via a checkoff box on their income tax return, a program that has since expanded to all 41 states with a broad-based income tax.¹⁴⁷ State charitable contribution programs have mushroomed quickly and often been added in a scattershot manner, leading states to adopt more formal procedures for adding new programs to tax forms, maintaining existing programs, and ensuring that money directed to charitable contributions is spent effectively.¹⁴⁸ But the idea that taxpayers should have the opportunity to choose where some of their money goes has precedent across the nation.

Could a broader effort to draw citizens into the budget process work at the federal level? While most participatory budgeting programs worldwide have been at the local level, a few regional or national programs have been attempted, including a nationwide program that operated in Portugal and allocated 5 million euros of funding in 2018, with voting taking place at polling places, online and via text.¹⁴⁹

In the United States, a national program that brought citizen input into the budgeting process could take one of a number of forms. One option would be to simply expand the current presidential campaign fund checkoff program to enable taxpayers to direct a portion of their federal income tax payment to one or more of a specified list of causes – deficit reduction, for example, or education or health care. A more ambitious option would be to create a national participatory budget process in which citizens or groups of citizens propose ideas that are debated through a deliberative process and voted on by the public, with the winners either receiving public funding or appearing as options on the next federal income tax form for voluntary diversion of a share of a taxpayer’s income tax payment.

Federal agencies could also be directed to dedicate a share of their budget to be determined through participatory processes. Cities such as Oakland, California, have already experimented with the use of participatory budgeting tools to direct the spending of federal block grants.¹⁵⁰

Even if the amount of money shaped by direct citizen participation is small, giving citizens a direct stake in the budget process could be a starting point for communicating the desires and priorities of the public to an often-disconnected Congress and educating the public about how the federal budget works, while creating new opportunities for democratic dialog and participation.

Empowering citizens in elections

Americans of all political persuasions agree: There is too much money in politics. And the role of money in politics gives special interests and the wealthy too much power relative to ordinary citizens.

Three-quarters of Americans believe that “there should be limits on the amount of money individuals and organizations can spend on campaigns,” according to a 2018 Pew Research Center poll, including 71% of Republicans.¹⁵¹ Only 25% of Democrats and 28% of Republicans in the same poll believed that it was accurate to describe America as a place where “people who give a lot of money to elected officials do not have more influence than others,” while majorities in both parties believed it was important that campaign donors don’t wield more influence than others.¹⁵² A 2019 Gallup poll found that only 20% of Americans were satisfied with the nation’s campaign finance laws, a lower percentage than any other issue in the poll.¹⁵³

A particular target of public ire is the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* (FEC), which legalized unlimited corporate contributions

to independent expenditure political campaigns on First Amendment grounds. The *Citizens United* decision was followed four years later by the decision in the case of *McCutcheon v. FEC*, which eliminated limits on the amount that an individual could give to candidates and parties in an individual election.

The impact of *Citizens United* (and the related *Speechnow.org v. FEC*) on American politics has been profound. Since the decisions, the amount of money spent in elections by outside “dark money” groups, “super PACs” and others has ballooned to more than \$2.5 billion in the 2020 presidential elections according to the Center for Responsive Politics.¹⁵⁴ While the initial concern was over a flood of contributions from corporations and labor unions, the biggest effect has been to unleash a torrent of campaign spending from the nation’s wealthiest individuals.

In 2016, for example, fewer than 400 families gave more than half of all of the money raised in the presidential race.¹⁵⁵ Individual megadonors – including Republicans Sheldon and Miriam Adelson, independent Michael Bloomberg and Democrat Tom Steyer – have given tens of millions of dollars to independent groups seeking to influence elections, swamping the contributions of small donors and enabling a few ultra-wealthy individuals to have an outsized influence in political campaigns.¹⁵⁶

The recent Supreme Court decisions that equate money with free speech make it difficult for Congress to forward bipartisan compromises such as the 2002 McCain-Feingold bill, some of which has been overturned in subsequent court decisions.¹⁵⁷ But there are reforms that have the potential to build common ground and move the nation closer to a campaign finance system in which candidates can afford to be more responsive to the public than to a small number of ultra-rich individuals.

Across the country, local and state governments are working to bolster the political power of small donors through several types of programs:¹⁵⁸

- **Small-donor match programs**, such as those in New York City and Montgomery County, Maryland, use public funds to match small contributions to candidates who agree to forgo corporate and large individual contributions. In the New York program, for example, every small contribution to a candidate who has opted into the program is matched at a rate of between six- and eight-to-one.¹⁵⁹ In Montgomery County, candidates participating in the program raised 98% of their funds from small donors and matching funds, compared with 3% for those not participating.¹⁶⁰ The program also enabled candidates funded by small donors to wage more competitive races.

- **“Democracy voucher” programs**, such as a program in Seattle, issue vouchers to registered voters that they can use to pay for donations to candidates who agree to limits on campaign contributions. In Seattle’s case, residents get four vouchers of \$25 each. Analysis of the program found that it led to a higher percentage of donations and money raised by candidates coming from Seattle residents as opposed to people living outside the city – a shift that should make candidates and elected officials more responsive to constituents than to donors outside their jurisdictions.¹⁶¹
- **Clean elections programs** provide grants to candidates who agree to forgo certain private contributions. Maine’s program, for example, requires candidates to raise a qualifying number of small contributions to become eligible for public funding, and they must agree not to pursue private contributions after joining the program.¹⁶²

Support for small donors has been included in broad, bipartisan platforms for reform. The ReFormers Caucus – a bipartisan coalition of more than 200 former government officials – has supported a platform that calls for greater transparency in campaign giving, tax credits or rebates for small contributions, limiting the role of lobbyists in campaign fundraising, and strengthening enforcement of campaign finance laws.¹⁶³

A federal small donor matching program was part of a sweeping democracy reform bill passed along partisan lines in the House of Representatives in 2019.¹⁶⁴ In the polarized partisan hothouse of the last several years, building bipartisan support for campaign finance reform in Washington has been difficult. But policies such as small-donor match systems or tax credits for small campaign contributions have the potential to appeal to conservatives and progressives alike, empowering ordinary Americans at the expense of special interests and the very rich. In the 2020 presidential campaign, although residents of wealthier zip codes overwhelmingly favored Democratic candidate Joe Biden over Republican candidate Donald Trump, the two candidates raised similar amounts of money from less-wealthy zip codes.¹⁶⁵ While the allegiances of special interests and wealthy donors may shift from election to election, a campaign finance system with a hybrid of public and private funding can ensure that all types of candidates, from across the political spectrum, can wage effective campaigns.

Ultimately, no true campaign finance reform can occur until the *Citizens United* decision is repealed, either in the courts or via constitutional amendment. A 2017 poll found that more Americans oppose *Citizens United* than support it – a finding true for Democrats, Republicans and independents.¹⁶⁶ Twenty state legislatures – including those in “purple” states such as Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire and West Virginia – have called for a constitutional amendment on campaign finance reform, slightly more than half of the 38 states needed to

ratify an amendment.¹⁶⁷ By pursuing reforms to bolster the power of small donors in the political system, people from all political parties can begin to rebuild the bipartisan coalitions that forged federal reform bills such as McCain-Feingold, and take the first steps toward returning power in our democracy to ordinary Americans.

Enabling consumers to fix the stuff they own

Americans want to be able to fix the things they own when they break. Too often, however, manufacturers and retailers throw up roadblocks to repair – roadblocks that push consumers to buy new products even when their current products still have useful life.

Legislation to safeguard consumers' right to repair the products they own, especially electronics, has been introduced in many state legislatures with bipartisan support.¹⁶⁸ In 2019, at least 20 states introduced right-to-repair legislation.¹⁶⁹ The state bills were introduced by legislators from across the political spectrum, from Republicans in Georgia to a Democrat in California, with some introduced by groups from both parties, like the bills in Virginia and Illinois.¹⁷⁰ There are important elements of right to repair reforms pending in Washington, D.C., including a medical right to repair effort to help hospitals in the pandemic and FTC investigations into repair protections.¹⁷¹

Right to repair is very popular across the board. A 2019 YouGov and Data for Progress poll showed that 71% of Americans support the right to repair, with favorability ranging from 76% among Republicans to 65% among Democrats.¹⁷² That level of support is unusually high for any policy, John Ray – a YouGov senior political analyst – told U.S. PIRG.¹⁷³

The Right to Repair campaign advocates for access to parts, tools and service information on behalf of consumers and independent repair shops in a wide variety of industries. Most people have experienced the challenge of getting consumer electronics like laptops, speakers and phones fixed. Some companies will render old products unusable, forcing them to be thrown away instead of being reused or recycled. Manufacturers of smartphones often won't release schematics or sell spare parts to third-party repair providers and sometimes even lock users out of their phones if they try to get third-party repair.¹⁷⁴ That means that when your phone breaks, you are often forced to go to the manufacturer, which may refuse to offer repairs for every problem, might charge huge fees, and will often pressure you to buy a new device.¹⁷⁵

Right to repair is important for all kinds of equipment and devices. Modern farm machinery, for example, is built with electronic control systems, which require special tools, software and

information to diagnose and fix when they malfunction.¹⁷⁶ Yet, equipment manufacturers have been refusing to provide diagnostic software or the tools and information needed to repair machinery, leaving farmers with expensive and useless equipment they have to wait for an authorized technician to fix, spending money and losing valuable work time.¹⁷⁷

Problems with repair also emerged as an issue during the COVID-19 crisis. Manufacturers of medical devices restrict access to repair manuals, service keys and parts, which makes certain repairs impossible and interferes with a hospital's ability to care for patients.¹⁷⁸ During COVID-19, the inability to repair and maintain ventilators and other equipment put public health at risk.¹⁷⁹ A U.S. PIRG Education Fund Report found that nearly half of 222 surveyed medical repair technicians reported they had been denied access to "critical repair information, parts or service keys" since the start of the pandemic.¹⁸⁰

The national attention to the issue raised by COVID-19 resulted in the first national right-to-repair bill to appear before Congress: the Critical Medical Infrastructure Right-to-Repair Act of 2020, introduced by Sen. Ron Wyden and Rep. Yvette Clarke.¹⁸¹ This bill would give healthcare providers and equipment repairers access to the parts, tools and information they need to repair critical medical equipment during emergencies, and is supported by a wide range of organizations, including the National Rural Health Association, Color of Change, R Street Institute, and the Niskanen Center.¹⁸²

As Brittany Hunter from the Foundation for Economic Education, a free-market educational group, has argued, right to repair appeals to people from across the political spectrum. To conservatives, it speaks to basic concepts of individual property rights – that once you buy something you control it, including being able to repair it. To progressives, right to repair strikes at the monopolistic hold of big corporations over their lives and the economy.¹⁸³

Right to repair also affects people in all corners of the country in their daily lives – from smartphone users to farmers to doctors to troops in the field. And with discarded products wasting money and adding to the world's waste crisis, it's an increasingly critical issue. In addition to the medical right to repair legislation, the FTC must take action to prevent anti-competitive actions from major manufacturers that cause price gouging and consumer harm.

Fueling the growth of clean energy

Over the past few decades, America has seen a dramatic increase in renewable energy from wind, solar, and geothermal power. Nearly 80% of Americans, from across the political

spectrum, agree that the country's energy priority should be developing renewable energy sources rather than increasing U.S. production of fossil fuels.¹⁸⁴ The growth of the renewable energy industry has been driven by federal tax incentives, coupled with state policies, which have helped to create enough demand to spur economies of scale and technological improvements.¹⁸⁵

Clean energy tax credits, and in particular the investment tax credit (ITC) and the production tax credit (PTC) for renewable energy, have encouraged the adoption of solar and wind energy for over a decade and have had strong bipartisan support since their creation. However, the PTC is set to expire in 2020, and the size of the ITC was reduced in 2020 and is set to decrease further in the coming years.¹⁸⁶ By updating and extending both the ITC and the PTC as well as modernizing incentives for energy efficiency and electric vehicles, Congress can support the continued growth of the renewables industry and support the transition to an economy powered by clean energy.

The ITC is a dollar-for-dollar credit for expenses invested in renewable energy properties, particularly solar developments. It was originally established as a part of the Energy Policy Act of 2005, passed by a Republican-led Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush. Due to its success and strong bipartisan popularity, it has since been extended multiple times.¹⁸⁷ In 2018, the ITC was extended and modified for non-solar technologies through the Bipartisan Budget Act.¹⁸⁸ The most recent extension created a 30% credit for qualified expenditures through 2019, which decreased to 26% in 2020, will decrease to 22% in 2021, and for 2022 onwards will decrease to 10% in addition to no longer being available to residential customers.¹⁸⁹

The PTC is a per-kilowatt-hour credit that has particularly helped fuel the growth of the wind industry.¹⁹⁰ It was originally authored by a Republican senator and a Democratic senator in 1992.¹⁹¹ In 1999, when it was set to expire, Congress noted that the PTC had been essential to the development of renewable energy and extended it with strong bipartisan support.¹⁹² It has since been extended multiple times and is set to expire at the end of 2020.¹⁹³

These tax credits as well as others for new technologies like battery storage have bipartisan support in Congress and across the country as well. According to a study by the Global Strategy Group, 89% of voters support extending clean energy tax incentives for solar, wind and energy storage as of 2019. That includes 95% of Democrats, 86% of independents, and 83% of Republicans.¹⁹⁴ Renewable energy has become an important part of the economies of Republican-leaning states — indeed, in terms of wind and solar energy as a percentage of

electricity consumption, the three leading states are Kansas, Iowa and North Dakota.¹⁹⁵ Strong and growing concern about climate change adds to the appeal of renewable energy, especially for progressives and independents. And people from across the political spectrum find that obtaining a growing share of the nation's energy from the sun and the wind just makes common sense.

The economic disruption caused to the renewable energy industry and other industries by the COVID-19 pandemic is another reason why extending the tax credits — and ideally allowing incentives to be received as cash grants — is critical. Extending tax credits and making incentives available as cash grants (as occurred in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act following the Great Recession) will give entities that want to invest in renewable energy the confidence to do so.

In addition, lawmakers can support both renewable energy like wind and solar, as well as the transition to a clean economy, by making financial incentives available for standalone energy storage technologies, by updating and modernizing incentives for energy efficiency, and by incentivizing electric vehicles and electric vehicle charging infrastructure.¹⁹⁶

Renewable energy is a rare issue with a history of bipartisan support, near universal public backing, and a set of policy tools available that are already proven to work. Updating, modernizing, and extending tax credits and other incentives for wind, solar, energy storage, electric vehicles and energy efficiency can support a popular goal of a fully clean economy run on renewables and are collectively a great candidate for bipartisan cooperation.

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