Abraham Lincoln described the American experiment as “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Yet the federal government today is a far cry from that vision. Instead, our democracy has been corrupted by the privileged and powerful to ensure that it does not reflect the will of the people, but instead serves to further consolidate wealth and power among the minority who already have both.

And as a result, our government has failed to take on the challenges that impact wide swaths of working America. People work longer hours, struggling to hold onto modest pay and benefits, while Wall Street gets extraordinarily wealthy. College and homeownership slide out of reach. Health care costs keep going up. Fossil fuel barons run our energy policy while ferocious storms, catastrophic forest fires, and endless droughts wreck lives and livelihoods and compromise our children’s futures.

We will be unable to address the big challenges we face as a nation — the ones that determine whether the America we leave our children creates more opportunity for a brighter future than the one we inherited — until we boldly and decisively reform our democracy. Dark money, extreme gerrymandering, voter suppression, and the lack of equal representation have hijacked American democracy. This blueprint lays out specific legislative strategies that “We the People” should take to counteract all of these tactics and create a democracy worthy of our nation’s great ideals.

Jeffrey A. Merkley, U.S. Senator
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ENDING DARK MONEY

“Our founders made it clear that this is supposed to be a nation of, by, and for the people. But in recent years, our democracy has been hijacked by powerful special interests. We need to end the dark money that is drowning out the voices of ordinary Americans in our elections. Our government needs to work to create opportunity for everyone, not rig our economy for the wealthy and powerful.” - Senator Jeff Merkley

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT OVERTURNING CITIZENS UNITED

The Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision opened the floodgates to unlimited secret spending by corporations and wealthy individuals to influence elections. We need to swiftly pass a constitutional amendment to reverse Citizens United and allow Congress to put reasonable limits on the raising and spending of money in elections, including super PAC independent expenditures.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass Senator Tom Udall’s constitutional amendment reversing Citizens United to eliminate super PACs and allow Congress to get unlimited, dark special interest money out of politics.
BRIGHTER SUNSHINE ON DONATIONS

Special interests can spend vast sums of “dark money” to influence elections without voters being able to see the source of the money or take into account the identities and interests of the people spending that money.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass legislation to reverse an arbitrary rule by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) that requires disclosure for funds contributed to independent expenditure campaigns only when earmarked for electioneering communications.

Pass Senator Whitehouse’s DISCLOSE Act (S.1585) to provide robust disclosure requirements for corporations, labor organizations, PACs, and all 501(c) entities for donors that contribute more than $10,000.

Pass Senator Klobuchar’s Honest Ads Act (S.1989) to enhance transparency and accountability for online political advertisements by requiring those who purchase and publish such ads to disclose to the public the sources of the advertisement’s funding.

GIVE SHAREHOLDERS A VOICE IN POLITICAL SPENDING

When corporations participate in the political arena, they are doing so with resources owned by their shareholders, who have a diverse range of political views. Public companies should be required to disclose to shareholders their political spending, and shareholders should have a voice on political spending decisions being made on their behalf.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass Senator Menendez’s Shareholder Protection Act (S.1726) to require shareholder authorization before a public company may make certain political expenditures.
GRANT GREATER OVERSIGHT FOR PUBLIC CITIZENS

All Americans should be able to hold corporations accountable for breaking campaign finance laws by creating a federal private right of action. Federal law would be based on the 1974 California state law giving citizens the right to sue for campaign finance violations if the state enforcement office or state Attorney General do not act.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass legislation to grant private citizens the right to sue corporations for breaking campaign finance laws if the Federal Election Commission fails to act.

PROMOTE SMALL DONOR ENGAGEMENT IN ELECTIONS

Thomas Jefferson wrote that “a government is republican in proportion as every member composing it has his equal voice in the direction of its concerns.” When elected officials and candidates depend on large donations to fund campaigns, large donors have disproportionate influence. When small, grassroots donations are at the center of the campaign finance system, ordinary citizens have equal influence.

A number of jurisdictions have implemented voluntary systems allowing candidates — who choose to participate — to run viable campaigns raising only small dollar donations so they are not beholden to big donors. Congress should do the same for federal elections.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass Senator Durbin’s Fair Elections Now Act (S. 1640), legislation strengthening the presidential public financing system and expanding the system to include Congressional elections.
“Americans deserve fair and unrigged representation in Congress. Unfortunately, many congressional districts are so gerrymandered that they suit the needs of politicians and special interests instead of the people. Americans know that Congress is broken, and the tailor-made congressional districts are part of the problem. Let’s take the drawing of congressional districts out of the hands of political party bosses and politicians, and instead allow fair, independent commissions to create congressional districts that are designed to give the people fair representation, rather than to disenfranchise voters and manipulate our democracy for political gain.” – Senator Jeff Merkley
STOP POLITICIZING CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICTS

The idea of a representative democracy is simple: voters choose their elected officials. Far too often, however, the opposite is true. Instead, elected officials choose their voters by creating carefully gerrymandered, sometimes tortured districts to ensure the outcome they want.

To avoid this problem voting districts should not be designed by partisan elected officials, but rather by independent redistricting commissions. States with independent redistricting commissions tend to have more competitive districts, yet fewer than half of the states in our country have some form of these commissions. We cannot have a government by and for the people so long as the composition of the House of Representatives does not reflect the voters' intent.

The time is now to take the partisan politics out of congressional redistricting. This can be done by ensuring that the responsibilities of redrawing districts go to a commission made of members chosen for their independence from partisan intentions and bias. Let's leave the redrawing of congressional districts to the real experts of democracy — the citizens who would live in them.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass legislation to require independent redistricting commissions to draw lines for all U.S. House of Representative districts. The legislation should:

Set clear requirements for commissioners to be independent from partisan decision making.

Provide funding to states to help establish these commissions.

Require that commissioners defend their maps and engage citizens with concrete proof that they have met the criteria, by submitting a report card defending the commission’s rationale behind the redrawn districts.

Establish criteria that redistricting plans must meet, based on best practices from states, aimed at ensuring fair representation of racial minorities and other communities of interest; preserving, where possible, the geographic integrity of entities like cities and counties; striving for districts that are contiguous and compact; and taking partisan considerations out of the process while prioritizing competitive districts.

Requiring outreach to communities and access to redistricting tools to allow meaningful participation and strong transparency.
PROTECTING AND EXPANDING THE RIGHTS OF VOTERS

“There is no right more fundamental than the right to vote. It is unacceptable that after our country’s long and difficult struggles to ensure voting rights for all Americans, some states disenfranchise tens or hundreds of thousands of citizens ahead of elections. It is particularly distressing when those efforts target racial minorities.”
- Senator Jeff Merkley

REINSTATE THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT

For over half a century, the Voting Rights Act has played a critical role in clearing large roadblocks states created to limit access to the ballot box, particularly among communities of color, which is why Congress overwhelmingly reauthorized the Act the last time it was considered. However, the Supreme Court’s Shelby County v. Holder wrong-headed decision cut off the Voting Rights Act’s implementation at the knees. Since that Supreme Court decision, we have seen states enact restrictive laws making it harder for people to vote, disproportionately impacting communities of color.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass Senator Leahy’s Voting Rights Advancement Act (S.1419) to restore and modernize the Voting Rights Act after the Supreme Court gutted the landmark civil rights law in the 2013 Shelby County decision.
EQUAL ACCESS TO POLLING LOCATIONS

The 2018 elections saw an unprecedented midterm turnout across the nation. Unfortunately, several states met this surge of interest by making voting harder, especially among lower income communities, minorities, and college students. By closing certain polling locations in these areas, many places lacked sufficient operational voting machines to meet demand. As a result, targeted communities were forced to stand in long lines. There is still work to do in order to break down the geographical barrier of voting across the country and it begins with increasing access to the polls.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Require each state to evenly distribute polling stations based on the number of registered voters per polling station.

Ensure that each polling location does not exceed 30 minutes of waiting time, and require states to create a contingency plan to prevent long lines.

Require states and election authorities to give notice of polling location closures 60 days prior to the closure.

Strengthen criteria to make it harder to close or relocate polling stations.

Provide funds to states to facilitate greater access to polling locations, specifically by increasing accessibility in areas with predominantly minority populations, and hiring staff and purchasing voting machines to ensure lower wait times.
VOTE-BY-MAIL

Voting is our most sacred and fundamental right as Americans. Instead of making it harder to vote, as far too many states across the country have done, we should make it easier—just like in Oregon, whose turnout of eligible voters in the 2018 midterm elections was 62.9%. Allowing all voters to vote by mail, with free postage, makes it easier to vote for people with difficult work schedules or limited mobility, and allows people to spend time considering and researching their votes at home.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass Sen. Ron Wyden’s Vote by Mail Act (S.1231), which allows the right for every American to vote by mail without additional conditions or requirements, except a deadline for returning the ballot, and allows for no excuse absentee voting.

Pass legislation to direct the United States Postal Service to provide free postage to any ballot sent by mail. Free postage would be available for voters choosing to vote by mail or vote using absentee ballots.
ENHANCE ELECTION SECURITY

Many states and localities across the country are forced to run their elections with obsolete equipment, which have hardware and software systems that are vulnerable to cyber security attacks via hacking. It is unacceptable for any election in our nation to be susceptible to attacks, domestic or foreign. We need to set stronger rules to protect our elections and upgrade our voting machines to use the safest and most reliable technology available.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass legislation to ensure states update their voting systems to feature paper ballots with a paper trail, and to ensure their cybersecurity is up-to-date, helping protect the integrity of their system, website, and data.

Increase funding for states through the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) to upgrade voting machines, audit elections, enhance cybersecurity protocols, and invest in the most up-to-date technology or server upgrades.

EXTEND EARLY VOTING TO A MINIMUM OF TWO WEEKS BEFORE ELECTIONS

Whether it is a job preventing you from reaching the polls or a family emergency, daily life events should not get in the way of casting your vote. Polls need to be flexible around American families' schedules, not the other way around. Providing the opportunity to vote over several weeks instead of just on Election Day makes it easier for every American to find a convenient time to vote.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Require all states to have early voting for at least two weeks before Election Day, including on the weekends. States and localities shall have discretion for establishing longer periods.
Instead of easier, it is becoming more and more difficult to vote in the United States in the 21st century. While some states make it harder for Americans to vote, it is imperative that every citizen has a right to support their candidates and initiatives at the polls.

STOP VOTER LIST PURGES

No U.S. citizen should arrive at the polls on Election Day only to find out that they are no longer registered to vote. Some states have purged voters’ registration simply for not voting in two consecutive elections. These and other aggressive purges are widely understood to be designed to make it harder to vote, especially for younger and less affluent voters who tend to move more frequently. Legislation is needed to standardize the criteria by which state election authorities may purge a name off the registered voter roll.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

In order to ensure all Americans can vote without having their registration carelessly thrown out, pass legislation that bans states from purging voters based on sporadic voting records. States should be permitted to remove voters from the rolls only in the case of a voter’s death or a move to a new voting jurisdiction.

Pass federal legislation requiring states to use multiple forms of notices, including mail, phone and email, to alert voters when their name will be purged from the rolls.
RESTORE A FELON’S RIGHT TO VOTE

Voting is a right, not a privilege that should be stripped as a punishment. Felon disenfranchisement has a long history as a tactic designed to limit African-American voting in the United States, dating back to the end of the Civil War. Once an American has served out a sentence, part of returning to society should include a restored ability to participate in our democracy and vote.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass Senator Cardin’s Democracy Restoration Act (S.1588), which would restore Federal voting rights of individuals when released from incarceration.

SEAMLESS VOTER REGISTRATION

Every aspect of the voting process should be easy, including registering to vote. Recent cases, like in Georgia, have shown how the registration process can be exploited to suppress votes. The process of voter registration should not be confusing or easily exploited. All eligible citizens should be automatically registered to vote where they live. And if you need to update your registration, the process should be simple, and should be possible at the same time you go to the polls to cast your vote.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass Senator Leahy’s Automatic Voter Registration Act (S.1353) to require states to automatically register eligible citizens to vote in elections for federal offices.

Pass Senator Klobuchar’s Same Day Registration Act (S.360) to require states to provide for same-day registration.
ENSURING EQUAL REPRESENTATION

“When a majority of Americans vote for a person to be president, it seems like common sense that that candidate should win.” – Senator Jeff Merkley

ABOLISH THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE AND ELECT PRESIDENTS BY POPULAR VOTE

The Electoral College does not fit our “We the People” model of government; it is profoundly unfair. In just two decades, we have now seen two elections where the majority of voters supported a candidate who did not become the President, due to the Electoral College. Now is the time to introduce an amendment to the Constitution to elect the President of the United States by direct popular vote.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Amend the constitution to elect the President of the United States by direct popular vote.

NO TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

There are roughly 4 million taxpaying Americans living in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the territories who do not have representation. They should have the opportunity to have their voices heard in Congress. Congress should convene a commission to propose a path forward to ensure that American citizens have the meaningful ability to shape their government, regardless of where they live.

AGENDA ACTION ITEMS

Pass legislation to create a commission to develop proposals to provide voting representation to American citizens in D.C., Puerto Rico, and insular territories that want it.
A BLUEPRINT FOR A WE THE PEOPLE DEMOCRACY

OREGON'S SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY

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