



# Americans Demand Democracy at the Polls

By Liz Kennedy and Danielle Root | December 1, 2016

This past Election Day, Americans across the country adopted democracy reforms through ballot initiatives to empower citizens and constrain the power of wealthy special interests in government. Democracy and government reforms in 12 states provide one of the few progressive victories of the 2016 elections. Voters passed numerous ballot resolutions with stunning majority support: Some resolutions passed with 91 percent voter approval.<sup>1</sup> People adopted solutions on a variety of issues, including overturning *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*; public financing for citizen-owned elections; lobbying reform, ethics, and disclosure; as well as independent redistricting and automatic voter registration.

These victories at the ballot box for pro-democracy solutions provide an important backdrop for understanding the election results and charting a course forward for government. One explanation is that a vote for President-elect Donald Trump constituted an act of protest against the current political system, the power of big money in politics and government, and the perceived corruption of government serving wealthy special interests.<sup>2</sup>

Citizens are not waiting for their elected leadership to take action on these questions but are instead moving forward with adopting policy solutions to bring about a government that is responsive and accountable to its people. Elected leaders at the local, state, and national levels must pay attention to these demands for democracy solutions and respond with real legislative reforms to revitalize the nation's democracy and rebalance the interests in government so that government works for the people.

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## Voters supported democracy solutions

Americans across the political spectrum are calling for change in the policies that shape U.S. elections, democracy, and government. This year, majorities of voters voted for a number of solutions, though a few proposals were also defeated.

## Alaska: Automatic voter registration

Voters in Alaska passed Ballot Measure 1, which will increase the number of registered voters in the state by automatically registering eligible Alaskans to vote. The state will use eligibility information that Alaskans provide when applying for their Permanent Fund Dividends—a dividend paid out to any Alaska resident that has lived within the state for a full calendar year and intends to remain in Alaska indefinitely.<sup>3</sup> The initiative was approved by 63 percent of voters. This will simplify and modernize the voter registration process and transform registration from a barrier into a gateway for Alaskan residents to participate and have their voices heard on Election Day.

## California: Statewide *Citizens United* amendment instructions, plus local redistricting, public financing, and lobbying solutions

Californians passed several democracy reform resolutions on election night, including Proposition 59, which instructs elected officials to overturn *Citizens United*.<sup>4</sup> The proposition passed with 52 percent support.<sup>5</sup> The precise language of the ballot initiative stated:

*Shall California's elected officials use all of their constitutional authority, including, but not limited to ratifying an amendment or amendments to the United States Constitution to overturn Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission and other applicable judicial precedents, to allow the full regulation or limitation of campaign contributions and spending, to ensure that all citizens, regardless of wealth, may express their views to one another, and to make clear that corporations should not have the same rights as human beings?*<sup>6</sup>

In Sacramento, California, voters passed Measure L—a redistricting resolution that creates a citizen-led independent commission to redraw the city council districts. This will help prevent improper drawing of election districts, making representation more reflective and fair. Fifty-three percent of voters voted yes on this ballot initiative.<sup>7</sup>

A similar initiative passed in Berkeley, California. Measure W1 will transfer the responsibility of redistricting from the Berkeley City Council to a citizens redistricting commission. Eighty-seven percent of voters approved this measure.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Berkeley residents passed Measure X1, which will create a citizen-funded election program. The program encourages candidates to limit contributions to their campaigns to no more than \$50 per person and requires that contributions only come from Berkeley residents.<sup>9</sup> Measure X1 rewards these candidates with \$6 of public financing for every \$1 they raise from Berkeley residents.<sup>10</sup> The initiative passed with 64 percent approval.<sup>11</sup>

In San Francisco, a stunning 87 percent of voters approved Proposition T, which bans lobbyists from giving unlimited travel gifts—or money designated for travel—to elected officials and places limits on lobbyists’ campaign contributions.<sup>12</sup> It also bans lobbyists from contributing directly to politicians’ campaigns and prevents them from acting as so-called bundlers—individuals who collect campaign contributions for a particular candidate’s campaign.<sup>13</sup> This will help limit the influence of corporate and wealthy special interests in San Francisco’s local elections and increase fair representation.

### Illinois: Local anti-corruption reforms

In both Boone County and McHenry County, Illinois, voters approved anti-corruption ballot initiatives. Voters in these counties passed resolutions that call on local and federal officials to pass anti-corruption reforms. Voters were asked whether they support:

*[P]rohibiting politicians from taking campaign money from special interests they regulate; increasing campaign funding transparency; allowing voters to contribute to candidates through a tax-rebate voucher; placing limits on how much super-PACs can raise and spend; and prohibiting elected officials and their senior staff from participating in lobbying activity for five years after leaving office.*<sup>14</sup>

### Maine: Ranked choice voting

Voters in Maine approved Question 5, which changes the way Maine residents elect their leaders by introducing a ranked voting system.<sup>15</sup> Proponents of the resolution agree that ranked voting gives voters more voice and more choice. As the name suggests, ranked voting allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. Tabulation then “proceeds in sequential rounds in which last-place candidates are defeated and the candidate with the most votes in the final round is elected.”<sup>16</sup> Fifty-two percent of Maine voters voted yes on Question 5.<sup>17</sup>

### Maryland: Local public financing reform

In Howard County, Maryland, voters approved Question A—a measure that establishes a citizens’ election fund.<sup>18</sup> The resolution enables the county council to establish the citizens’ election fund, which will match small donations and require participating candidates to reject large or corporate donations for county council and county executive races.<sup>19</sup> Candidates are able to opt-in to the program when they seek office. Proponents say that the public financing program will allow for broader, more diverse representation and for “candidates to be judged on the strength of their ideas, not their willingness to please the ruling class.”<sup>20</sup> Question A passed with 52 percent voter approval.<sup>21</sup>

## Missouri: Contribution limits

An incredible 70 percent of voters in Missouri approved a ballot initiative that will establish contribution limits for state and local politicians.<sup>22</sup> Under current law, Missouri does not have any limits on donations by individuals and corporations to candidates and political parties. Amendment 2 limits individual contributions to candidates for state or judicial office to \$2,600 per election. The amendment also limits donations to political parties to \$25,000 per election.<sup>23</sup>

In a step backward for voting rights and voter access, however, 63 percent of voters also approved a constitutional amendment allowing the imposition of strict photo identification, or ID, requirements for voting.<sup>24</sup> Voter ID laws are problematic, as they have been shown to disproportionately affect people of color, the elderly, and students who have difficulty obtaining required forms of identification.<sup>25</sup>

## Ohio: Local *Citizens United* amendment

Ohio voters in Shaker Heights and South Euclid passed ballot initiatives declaring support for a constitutional amendment that would strike down *Citizens United*.<sup>26</sup> The envisioned amendment would limit political spending by corporations, labor unions, and other associations. The ordinances require city officials to hold biannual public hearings before the city councils on the topic of “political influence by corporate entities” and send summaries of the hearings to congressional and state representatives.<sup>27</sup>

## Oregon: County-level contribution limits, disclosure, independent spending limits, and ranked choice voting

Oregon has been in the vanguard of democracy reforms. In this election, it was the first and only state in the country to use automatic voter registration.<sup>28</sup> Oregon experienced its highest-ever levels of voter registration and voter turnout in the 2016 election.<sup>29</sup>

Oregon voters also passed local democracy reform initiatives. Multnomah County passed Measure 26-184 with a yes vote from 88 percent of voters.<sup>30</sup> Measure 26-184 will limit contributions from individuals and political action committees to \$500; limit independent spending; and require disclosure of the true original sources of the big money behind political advertisements.<sup>31</sup> Benton County, for its part, will establish a ranked voting system for the general election—a measure which passed with 54 percent public approval.<sup>32</sup>

## Rhode Island: Ethics reform

In Rhode Island, 78 percent of voters said yes on Question 2. This amendment to the state constitution will restore the state ethics commission’s constitutional authority to police ethics violations committed by members of the General Assembly.<sup>33</sup> Proponents of the resolution say it will deter “unethical behavior in the legislature” and “force lawmakers to disclose potential conflicts” of interest.<sup>34</sup>

## South Dakota: Public financing, lobbying reforms, transparency, and ethics

Voters in South Dakota approved a ballot initiative that will establish a state public financing system. Measure 22 allows voters to assign two “democracy credits”—worth \$50 each—as donations to participating political candidates.<sup>35</sup> It also “tightens campaign finance and lobbying laws and creates an ethics commission.”<sup>36</sup> Under current law, South Dakota is the only state in America where lobbyists can give secret, unlimited gifts to politicians; Measure 22 will end this practice.<sup>37</sup>

Despite facing heavy opposition from groups funded by the Koch brothers—who sought to prevent rules for ethics and using money in politics—Measure 22 passed with 51.6 percent public approval.<sup>38</sup>

However, 57 percent of South Dakota voters also rejected an initiative on independent redistricting.<sup>39</sup>

## Washington state: *Citizens United* amendment

In Washington state, voters approved Initiative 735, which asks the state’s congressional delegation to propose a federal constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United*.<sup>40</sup> Sixty-four percent of Washington voters said yes to the initiative.<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately, an anti-corruption package that included public financing reform failed in Washington, with 53 percent of voters opposing the measure.<sup>42</sup>

## Wisconsin: *Citizens United* amendment

In Wisconsin, 18 communities voted to amend the U.S. Constitution to overturn *Citizens United*.<sup>43</sup> The initiative passed with overwhelming majorities in the following places: Rock County—the home of Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI)—at 86 percent; Reedsburg, at 86 percent; Manitowoc, at 81 percent; Delafield, at 79 percent; Neshkoro, at 88 percent; Spring Valley, at 91 percent; Osceola, at 86 percent; Mount

Horeb, at 84 percent; Monticello, at 86 percent; Clayton, at 86 percent; and the towns of New Glarus, at 83 percent; Harris, at 65 percent; Springdale, at 86 percent; Decatur, at 89 percent; Mount Pleasant, at 84 percent; Cadiz, at 87 percent; and Lake Tomahawk, at 91 percent.<sup>44</sup>

The proposed constitutional amendment would read: “Only people are allowed constitutional rights—not corporations, unions, nonprofits or other artificial entities, and that money does not constitute speech, nor does regulation of political contributions constitute a limit to speech.”<sup>45</sup>

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## Conclusion

Voters made their frustration with the current U.S. political and electoral system clear on Election Day in more ways than one. The overwhelming support that many of these ballot initiatives received demonstrates that democracy reform is not only what Americans want but also what they demand.

In states where these reform measures passed, government officials should go further by enacting measures to supplement and strengthen the ballot resolutions. Other states should follow suit by passing their own democracy reform measures that support citizen ownership of government and limit the power of wealthy special interests in government.

At the federal level, President-elect Trump has pledged to “drain the swamp” of the corruption of big money’s influence over government in Washington, D.C., and voters should expect his administration to follow through with comprehensive democracy reforms.<sup>46</sup>

Americans are fed up with the way money and special interests dominate the electoral system. Elected officials should recognize that voters are demanding major changes in these areas, and they should actively support democracy and government reforms in the years to come.

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