

Defending our Democracy: Reforming or Ending the Filibuster

As always, thank you for volunteering to write letters to your senators to protect and defend our rights and our very democracy!

The urgency is real [Opinion | A frantic warning from 100 leading experts: Our democracy is in grave danger](#) Below is an excerpt of the full article which you can read at the bottom of this document.

“Our entire democracy is now at risk,” the scholars write in [the statement](#), which I obtained before its release. “History will judge what we do at this moment.”

And these scholars underscore the crucial point: Our democracy’s long-term viability might depend on whether Democrats reform or kill the filibuster to pass sweeping voting rights protection.

“We urge members of Congress to do whatever is necessary — including suspending the filibuster — in order to pass national voting and election administration standards,” the scholars write, in a reference to the voting rights protections [enshrined in the For the People Act](#), which passed the House and is before the Senate.”

SAMPLE TEXT FOR LETTER

Defending our Democracy: Reforming or Ending the Filibuster

Dear Senator _____,

I'm writing to you as a voter and a concerned citizen, urging you to reform if not end the filibuster.

This is an urgent action, necessary to protect our democracy and many rights and protections that I hold dear as an American. The key points were made in the Washington Post on June 1, 2021 by a hundred scholars on democracy.

Without ending or substantially modifying the filibuster, vital legislation won't pass. Such legislation includes the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act and For the People Act. Both are necessary to ensure free and fair elections which are the foundations of our democracy.

(Please put your personal views or reasons for why the filibuster should be reformed or ended)

I'm urging you to stand up for and with your constituents and say you will vote to reform or end the filibuster and save our democracy.

Regards,
(your name)

SAMPLE TEXT FOR POSTCARDS

Dear Senator _____,

I urge you to vote to abolish or deeply reform the filibuster. We simply can't let the filibuster stand in the way of democracy.

You need to speak out to constituents and the media about the need to address the filibuster to pass the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act and For the People Act. Without these bills, our democracy may die. Defend our democracy, please!

From your constituent _____ in (zip code) _____

Opinion: A frantic warning from 100 leading experts: Our democracy is in grave danger

Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.). (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

Opinion by Greg SargentColumnist

June 1, 2021 at 9:49 a.m. EDT

Democrats can't say they weren't warned.

With yet another GOP effort to restrict voting underway in Texas, President Biden is now calling on Congress to act in the face of the Republican “assault on democracy.” Importantly, Biden cast that attack as aimed at “Black and Brown Americans,” meriting federal legislation in response.

That is a welcome escalation. But it remains unclear whether 50 Senate Democrats will ever prove willing to reform or end the filibuster, and more to the point, whether Biden will put real muscle behind that cause. If not, such protections will never, ever pass. Now, in a striking intervention, more than 100 scholars of democracy have signed a new public statement of principles that seeks to make the stakes unambiguously, jarringly clear: On the line is nothing less than the future of our democracy itself. “Our entire democracy is now at risk,” the scholars write in the statement, which I obtained before its release. “History will judge what we do at this moment.”

And these scholars underscore the crucial point: Our democracy’s long-term viability might depend on whether Democrats reform or kill the filibuster to pass sweeping voting rights protections.

“We urge members of Congress to do whatever is necessary — including suspending the filibuster — in order to pass national voting and election administration standards,” the scholars write, in a reference to the voting rights protections enshrined in the For the People Act, which passed the House and is before the Senate.

What’s striking is that the statement is signed by scholars who specialize in democratic breakdown, such as Pippa Norris, Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky. Other well-known names include Francis Fukuyama and Jacob Hacker.

“We wanted to create a strong statement from a wide range of scholars, including many who have studied democratic backsliding, to make it clear that democracy in America is genuinely under threat,” Lee Drutman, senior fellow at New America and a leading organizer of the letter, told me.

“The playbook that the Republican Party is executing at the state and national levels is very much consistent with actions taken by illiberal, anti-democratic, anti-pluralist parties in other democracies that have slipped away from free and fair elections,” Drutman continued.

Among these, the scholars note, are efforts by GOP-controlled state legislatures everywhere to restrict access to voting in ways reminiscent of tactics employed before the United States became a real multiracial democracy in the mid-1960s:

Republican lawmakers have openly talked about ensuring the “purity” and “quality” of the vote, echoing arguments widely used across the Jim Crow South as reasons for restricting the Black vote.

The scholars also sound the alarm about GOP efforts to deepen control of electoral machinery in numerous states, casting them as a live threat to overturn future elections, and a redoubling of emphasis on extreme gerrymanders and other anti-majoritarian tactics:

In future elections, these laws politicizing the administration and certification of elections could enable some state legislatures or partisan election officials to do what they failed to do in 2020: reverse the outcome of a free and fair election. Further, these laws could entrench extended minority rule, violating the basic and longstanding democratic principle that parties that get the most votes should win elections.

Democracy rests on certain elemental institutional and normative conditions. Elections must be neutrally and fairly administered. They must be free of manipulation. Every citizen who is qualified must have an equal right to vote, unhindered by obstruction. And when they lose elections, political parties and their candidates and supporters must be willing to accept defeat and acknowledge the legitimacy of the outcome.

After noting that all these Republican efforts are threatening those fundamental principles, the scholars warn: “These actions call into question whether the United States will remain a democracy.

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Crucially, the scholars note that the John Lewis Voting Rights Act — which would restore some protections gutted by the Supreme Court — would be insufficient, and they call for federal protections such as those in the For the People Act, or S.1.

“Just as it ultimately took federal voting rights law to put an end to state-led voter suppression laws throughout the South” in the 1960s, the scholars write, so must federal law step in again

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True electoral integrity demands a comprehensive set of national standards that ensure the sanctity and independence of election administration, guarantee that all voters can freely exercise their right to vote, prevent partisan gerrymandering from giving dominant parties in the states an unfair advantage in the process of drawing congressional districts, and regulate ethics and money in politics.

It is always far better for major democracy reforms to be bipartisan, to give change the broadest possible legitimacy. However, in the current hyper-polarized political context such broad bipartisan support is sadly lacking.

That is the rub. An acceptance that protecting democracy will never, ever, ever be bipartisan, and will happen only on a partisan basis, is fundamental to accepting the reality of the situation that Democrats face.

We can go back and forth about specific misgivings that some Democrats have about S.1 — see this good Andrew Prokop report for an overview — but the core question is whether Democrats will cross that Rubicon. So doing would lead inevitably to the need to reform or end the filibuster.

Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) is the most visible obstacle here. But an unknown number of other moderate Democrats are also reluctant to cross that Rubicon, and it's unclear how much effort Biden will put into making that happen. And so, when these scholars warn that history is watching, those Democrats are the ones who should take heed.