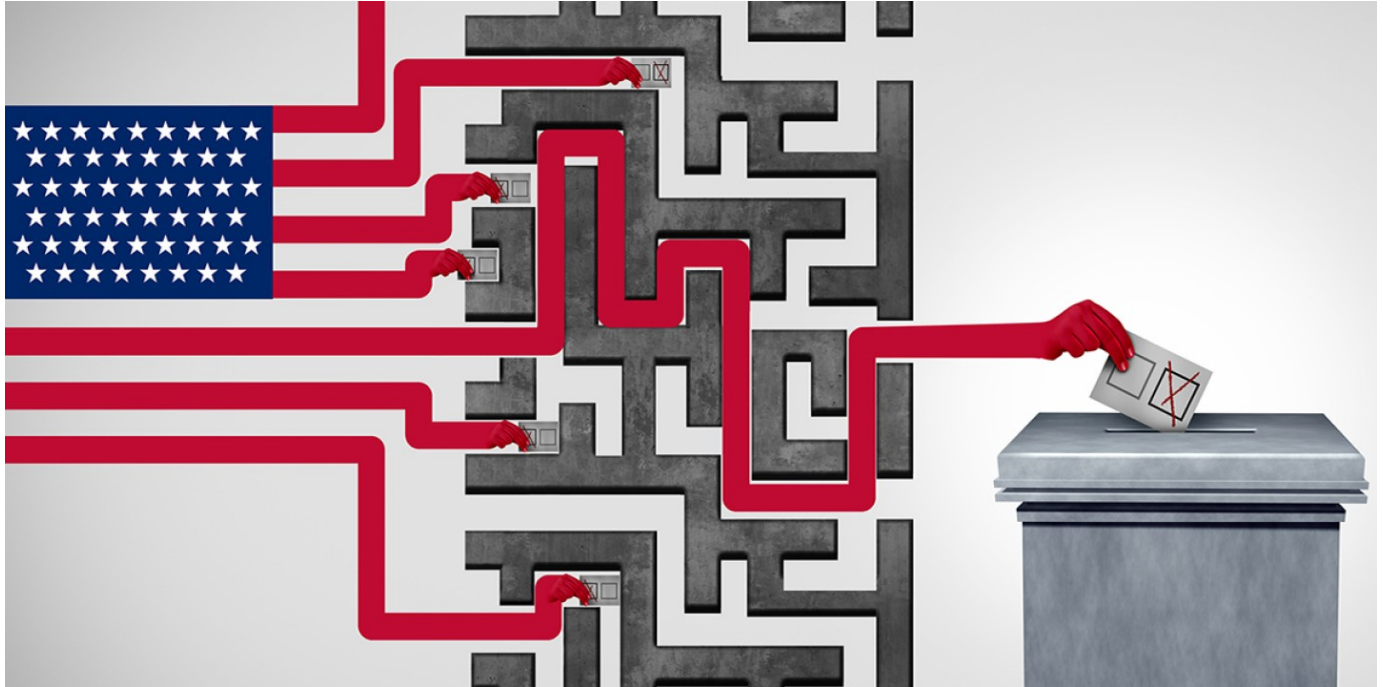


Voter suppression is lethal to democracy

We can't let the filibuster keep us from doing something about it.

From the Editors in the [August 11, 2021](#) issue



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In a July 13 speech, President Biden had some strong words for Republican efforts to make it harder to vote. He called the laws currently sweeping statehouses a “21st-century Jim Crow assault,” “the most un-American thing that any of us can imagine,” and “simply unconscionable.” It was a bully pulpit-thumping performance.

It was most notable, however, for what the president did not say: anything about the filibuster rule, its choke hold on federal legislation, or the prospect of Senate Democrats changing it so they can actually pass a voting rights law.

In Washington, the filibuster is the only real power GOP legislators have. In the majority of state governments, the party is dominant—and it’s using its power to try to change its national fortunes by suppressing votes. While no evidence of voter fraud was found in the 2020 election, since then 17 states have passed laws

restricting access to the ballot.

On July 12, Democrats left the Texas Legislature to prevent a quorum. They went to Washington, where they urged their federal counterparts to pass a bill that would outlaw the kinds of voting restrictions Texas Republicans are pushing. It was the day before Biden's speech, yet Democratic Washington's attention had already moved on to bills that can plausibly be enacted without filibuster reform. But how much will such bills matter if attacks on our democracy succeed?

That's what these state-level voting restrictions are: antidemocratic attacks. Yes, each party is looking out for its own electoral interests. But this is one case in which the Democrats are also plainly right, both constitutionally and morally. Erecting new obstacles to voting runs counter to the bedrock of democracy and fairness, all partisan calculations aside. It is increasingly difficult, however, for Americans to see anything beyond partisan advantage. So the voting rights debate rings as partisan—even though it involves a direct threat to the very system that allows any party to govern with democratic legitimacy in the first place.

Last year we editorialized against the filibuster, arguing that it's antidemocratic no matter which party happens to be wielding it ("Let the majority rule," Dec. 16). There are certainly counterarguments worth taking seriously—but not when the filibuster is being used to block legislation that would protect the vote, the most fundamental element of democracy itself.

Sen. Joe Manchin (D., W.Va.) opposes the sweeping voting rights bill put forth by his party. But Manchin's own narrower plan would accomplish a lot: a ban on gerrymandered congressional seats, an election day holiday, and more. It also includes softer versions of some GOP priorities, such as voter ID. It has all the hallmarks of a bipartisan compromise.

Or rather, it would if both parties were eager to protect democracy. If ten GOP senators can't be rallied to Manchin's plan—and so far he has convinced exactly none—then it will be clearer than ever that congressional bipartisanship is dead. Instead of trying to revive it, Biden, Manchin, and other Democratic holdouts need to decide which American tradition is more important to preserve: the filibuster or democracy.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Democracy in danger."