



## **ETHICS REFORMS: A MATTER OF FAITH**

### **WHAT'S THE MATTER?**

The success of American democracy depends on public trust—in each other as fellow Americans and in the federal government. That trust hinges on individuals at all levels of government whose loyalty to the Constitution outweighs their self-interest or partisan priorities. Current laws are insufficient to hold elected officials to high ethical standards. As a result, abuses of power and conflicts of interest have been widespread. Unfortunately, Americans' trust in the government has also been at record lows for more than a decade.<sup>1</sup> To improve public trust, we need rigorous ethics reforms to increase transparency and hold elected officials accountable to those they represent.

### **THE VALUES OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY**

As people of faith, we find ethics reforms crucial because standards of principled living are central to our lives. We believe every human being—regardless of race, gender, and socioeconomic status—is equally worthy of having their voice heard by a democratic government that is responsive, accountable, and representative of the people. We also believe the government should uphold the rule of law and the processes that establish that law. Our leaders have a responsibility to eschew any conflicts of interest and maintain an environment of transparency. Without strong ethics guidelines, self-interested individuals can abuse public trust by using the government to advance their own interests, resulting in oppression and an imbalance of power. Weak ethical standards or oversight threatens the basic premise of equality when rules are lax or ignored to increase power for some to the disadvantage of others.<sup>2</sup> Lack of strong ethics guidelines also perpetuates a legacy of white supremacy since elected leadership positions are disproportionately held by white people. Opportunities to abuse power for personal gain allow elected officials to exploit a position of privilege, often at the expense of marginalized, disempowered communities of color.<sup>3</sup>

### **THE DISTORTION OF OUR DEMOCRACY**

Recent experience has laid bare the distrust created when individuals serving at high levels of government do not reveal their financial ties nor their conflicts of interest.<sup>4</sup> This can contribute to suspicion of subsequent decisions and influence. Mistrust continues when the president and vice president are exempt from federal conflict of interest laws, leaving a nation with no recourse against potential bad actors in positions of power. Moreover, unethical and self-serving practices by those in power (who are disproportionately white and male) often result in the de facto exclusion of others from opportunities for advancement.<sup>5</sup> In the most egregious cases it may result in exploitation of the most vulnerable populations, often communities of color, with least access to recourse. Transparency in government shines a light on the actions of institutions to instill faith that they do, in fact, work for the greater good of our nation. While historically there have been political norms to guide ethical conduct, recent events have shown a need for codification to ensure ethical behavior in all branches of our government.<sup>6</sup>

## THE FAITHFUL RESPONSE

The *For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1)* seeks to reinforce ethical practices, guidelines, and norms in our democracy by curtailing abuses of power. It expands conflict of interest laws and strengthens their enforcement. It requires that both the president and vice president meet new disclosure requirements or divest personal financial interests that pose a conflict of interest. It also requires presidential and vice presidential candidates to disclose their individual tax returns and certain business tax returns, revealing any potential conflicts of interest or influence.

The proposed bill provides congressional ethics reforms that prohibit members of the House of Representatives from serving on boards of for-profit entities — a ban that already applies to senators. Additionally, it prohibits any member of Congress from introducing or helping to pass legislation in which they or their family have financial interests.

The “revolving door” between public and private sectors creates both conflicts of interest and undue influence on the government.<sup>7</sup> One way the *For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1)* slows this door is by preventing federal officials from granting government contracts to former employers for two years. It also checks conflicts of interest by limiting the award of federal contracts to any business controlled by the president, vice president, or any cabinet-level positions and their spouses. The bill also offers additional provisions that hold Supreme Court justices accountable to a code of ethics, help protect U.S. elections from foreign interference, and create more transparency around lobbying activities.

Finally, the *For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1)* provides deterrents to ethics abuses while buttressing trust in our leaders and institutions. It empowers the U.S. Office of Government Ethics (OGE) to enforce ethics rules, conduct formal investigations into ethics violations, and issue subpoenas. Additionally, it holds all federal employees, including White House staff, subject to OGE ethics regulations and requires all senior executive branch employees to sign an ethics pledge.

When existing laws harm the institutions of democracy or are shown to be unjust, it is our responsibility to make reforms that uphold the dignity of each person and bolster public trust in those sacred institutions. The *For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1)* takes us a step closer to creating and maintaining trust in our leaders by holding them accountable to the laws of the land and the people they serve.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/14/americans-views-of-government-low-trust-but-some-positive-performance-ratings/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/congress-must-pass-people-act>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/08/for-the-fifth-time-in-a-row-the-new-congress-is-the-most-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-ever/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://harvardjol.com/2018/03/25/it-is-all-about-the-money-presidential-conflicts-of-interest/>

<sup>5</sup> Axios Hard Truths [“The \(mostly\) white revolving door”](#)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/proposals-reform-national-task-force-rule-law-democracy>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.citizen.org/article/slowing-the-federal-revolving-door/>

Successful social constructs rely on mutual trust between the parties involved. For a nation, that trust must be maintained by its citizens and their government. This trust is based on respect for each person’s divine nature and requires strict adherence to ethical and moral codes. **The government’s role is to maintain that trust by respecting the rule of law, institutional norms, and policies that provide transparency.** Doing so prevents abuses of power that damage the communities our government is meant to serve. Jointly, citizens and the government empower this trust by advocating for and then strengthening the guardrails that prevent oppression through the misuse of power.

- Wendy Dennehy, *Engage Director for Protecting Democracy, Mormon Women For Ethical Government*