



## NewsRoom

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The boogeymen in American politics

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Trust in government is at an all-time low and rampant political polarization has made it almost impossible for Democrats and Republicans to talk with each other about politics. It doesn't take a political scientist, or even a particularly insightful observer of our political process, to conclude that politics today are a mess and they seem to be getting worse.

Unfortunately, of the myriad of potential solutions to America's problems, two of the most frequently proffered — redistricting reform and overturning the Citizens United ruling — are unlikely to bring about the change that we want. They are the boogeymen of American politics — scary, menacing and the subject of many a good story, but ridding ourselves of them will not solve the problems that ail us.

Let's start with redistricting reform. As most readers know, the Constitution requires that we redraw district lines every 10 years to account for demographic shifts. It didn't take long for the redistricting process to be captured by political parties in an effort to increase their share of the legislative pie — a strategy known as "gerrymandering."

Gerrymandering has since become the scapegoat of many of the biggest problems in American politics — most notably political polarization. And while redistricting reform is almost certainly a good thing, it is unlikely to cure the ills of polarization. For evidence to support this statement, we don't even need to leave the U.S. Capital. The U.S. Senate, which is, of course, free from the redistricting process, demonstrates about the same levels of political polarization as the lower house.

Redistricting is also frequently blamed for the difference between the overall votes in a state and the number of seats given to each party. For example, in the 2012 election in North Carolina, more North Carolinians voted for Democratic members of Congress than Republican members of Congress, yet the Republicans won nine of North Carolina's 13 House seats. While it is convenient to suggest that reforming the redistricting process would solve (or at least alleviate) this problem, this situation can be blamed as much (if not more) on the way we have settled and migrated than on the redistricting process.

As America's cities have become increasingly Democratic, there are few ways to draw district lines that do not result in the Democrats winning a few urban districts by large numbers, therefore spreading the Republican vote out across many more districts. It is therefore hard to imagine any redistricting mechanism that does not result in some difference between votes and seats — and likely a difference that benefits the Grand Old Party.

Repealing Citizen United is the other political reform that is consistently bandied about in both parties. Indeed, the April 17 episode of NBC's "Meet the Press" featured Democratic activist (and erstwhile Batman) George Clooney as well as Gov. Pat McCrory each criticizing the Citizens United decision. And much like districting reform, overturning Citizens United might very well be a good idea, but it would not alleviate the problem.

While the Supreme Court case Citizens United v. FEC has influenced the practice of American politics, it has not fundamentally changed how candidates are funded or who gets elected. Money in politics was rampant well before Citizens United, and the stage has been set for extraordinary levels of campaign spending at least since 1976 when the Supreme Court ruled that money is akin to speech. And the seeds were sown for the notion of corporate personhood (one of the often-cited sticking points of Citizens United) more than a century earlier.

What this means is that the Citizens United decision probably opened the door for more spending on politics, and almost certainly made it more difficult to track campaign contributions, but the cat was far out of the bag before the court spoke on Citizens United. And further, there is little evidence that money does a very good job predicting who will win an election. For evidence on this point, you don't need to scour academic journals; instead just read up on Jeb Bush's extraordinary levels of fundraising and his anemic vote totals in the 2016 Republican primaries.

My point is not to criticize political reform in general, but rather to focus us on the issues and reforms that can really change American politics for the better — even if they don't make for as punchy of a sound bite. Let's quit hunting the boogeyman, and instead pursue reforms that can put us on a path towards a better functioning democracy.

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— Index References —

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