



Closing Accountability Gaps in American Governance

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The mechanisms meant to hold our public officials accountable have been unfortunately compromised. Congressional reelection rates and long average tenures have reinforced ingrained power, and billions in lobbying expenses take precedence over the voice of Americans in the working class. Additionally, executive authority has expanded under the National Emergencies Act, allowing presidents to act with limited immediate oversight. This policy brief examines these structural challenges and proposes policy reforms to strengthen accountability and restore the system of checks and balances within American governance.

II. OVERVIEW

Accountability refers to the ability of elected officials to be held personally liable through oversight, transparency, and removal from office if needed. In practice, these safeguards are faltering. Congressional reelection rates exceed 90 percent, with average tenures of 8.6 years in the House and over 11 years in the Senate, limiting turnover and reinforcing entrenched power. Simultaneously, lobbying payments amount to billions annually, raising concerns about disproportionate influence between billionaires and American voters over

policymaking. Executive authority has also over-expanded through the *National Emergencies Act*, which allows presidents to declare anything they personally view as an emergency with limited oversight. Additionally, governance failures at the state level, such as prolonged budget delays, illustrate how lack of accountability can directly impact thousands of government workers. These patterns indicate systemic weaknesses across different branches of government.

A. Relevance

Government accountability is essential to maintaining popular sovereignty and public trust. When officials face little-to-zero consequences for inaction or prolonged tenure, citizens experience reduced representation. High levels of lobbying further contribute to this issue as financial resources may outweigh voters' interests. The expansion of executive emergency powers also threatens the balance between branches of government by allowing unilateral action without any oversight. These issues are nonpartisan, as both major parties have benefited from tenure advantages and expanded authority. Addressing them is necessary to ensure a more balanced and representative system.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Concerns over concentrated political power have developed over time despite the Constitution's system of checks and balances. The current congressional seniority system strengthened the influence of long-serving members, limiting turnover and reinforcing institutional control. Efforts to impose term limits have been restricted by *U.S. Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton*, which requires a constitutional amendment for implementation. Similarly, the National Emergencies Act was intended to regulate executive power but has enabled broad use of emergency declarations with limited review. Current debates focus on whether reforms such as term limits or stricter emergency controls would improve accountability, though no major changes have been enacted thus far.

In modern-day America, these issues are driven by three distinct shifts. First, while congress is constitutionally designed to check presidential power, the legislative branch has largely shifted toward political loyalty and party alignment. Representatives who try to enforce standard democratic practices or even challenge executive overreach are often pushed out, leaving behind a legislative branch hesitant to challenge executive overreach. Secondly, even when courts rule against the government, new legislative provisions seek to limit a judge's power. For instance, provisions in recent tax bills require citizens suing the government to pay a financial bond before a court can use its contempt power to enforce an order. This makes it significantly harder for courts to punish officials who openly violate judicial rulings. And Lastly, Accountability requires a public that agrees on basic facts. However, the current media landscape is highly polarized, causing citizens to inhabit entirely different realities depending on where they get their news.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders are the American people, whose representation and economic stability are directly affected by government accountability. High reelection rates in Congress, combined with billions spent annually on lobbying, have increased public concern that elected officials are more responsive to donors and party interests than to constituents. Federal and state employees are also affected when legislative dysfunction delays budgets, salaries, or public services, as seen in prolonged state budget disputes in states such as North Carolina. Additionally, members of Congress, executive officials, lobbying organizations, and political parties are stakeholders because reforms involving term limits, emergency powers, and lobbying restrictions would directly alter the balance of political influence and institutional authority within the federal government.

B. Risks of Indifference

Choosing to ignore these cracks in our system normalizes political stagnation. If elected officials continue to face few consequences for abuse of power, public confidence in democratic institutions will continue to decline. When communities feel invisible, voter turnout dissipates and causes people to give up on civic participation altogether.

The continuous expansion of executive authority could also weaken the constitutional system of checks and balances. If emergency powers remain broadly interpreted without strong congressional oversight, future presidents may continue using these authorities to bypass traditional legislative processes. Long congressional tenures and entrenched political systems can discourage new leadership and reduce innovation in

policymaking. When reelection becomes nearly guaranteed, officials may prioritize party loyalty or donor interests over constituent concerns. Furthermore, heavy lobbying influence may continue to give wealthy individuals and corporations greater access to policymakers than ordinary Americans.

Globally, continuing this domestic instability risks permanently damaging America's reputation as a stable democracy. Democratic stability and government transparency have historically strengthened America's global reputation. Continued political dysfunction, polarization, and weakened accountability could reduce confidence in American democratic institutions both domestically and abroad.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Government accountability is not a partisan issue because the constitutional system of checks and balances was designed to protect all Americans regardless of political ideology. Concerns about concentrated political power affect citizens across party lines, especially when elected officials prioritize political loyalty or institutional power over public interest. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have benefited from expanded executive authority.

1. Strengthening democratic representation
Increasing accountability through reforms such as congressional term limits and stronger oversight of emergency powers would encourage greater political responsiveness. More regular turnover in office could create opportunities for newer perspectives and reduce the concentration of political influence among long-serving officials. This would help ensure that government institutions remain more reflective of the public they serve.

2. Restoring institutional balance

The Constitution established separate branches of government to prevent any single institution from accumulating excessive authority. The National Emergencies Review Act would reinforce the supreme court's role in approving or reviewing emergency actions rather than allowing unilateral executive decision-making. Strengthening institutional oversight would help preserve the balance intended by the framers of the Constitution.

3. Increasing public trust and civic participation

When citizens believe government institutions are transparent and accountable, they are more likely to participate in elections and civic life. Greater oversight and clearer limits on political power could improve confidence in democratic institutions. This is especially important for younger generations, many of whom feel increasingly disconnected from the political system.

V. TRIED POLICY

Several reforms have previously attempted to address issues related to government accountability and political power. One major example is the National Emergencies Act, passed in 1976 to regulate presidential emergency powers. The law was designed to create formal procedures for declaring national emergencies and to provide Congress with oversight authority.

However, critics argue that the legislation ultimately failed to impose meaningful limits because presidents can still declare emergencies broadly while Congress faces significant procedural barriers when attempting to terminate them.

Another notable effort involved congressional term limits. During the 1990s, multiple states attempted to impose limits on how long members of Congress could serve. However, the Supreme Court case *U.S. Term Limits, Inc. v. Thornton* ruled that states could not independently establish qualifications such as term limits for federal officeholders. As a result, implementing congressional term limits would require a constitutional amendment rather than state-level legislation.

More recently, bipartisan proposals such as the ARTICLE ONE Act have sought to reform emergency powers by requiring congressional approval for long-term emergency declarations. While these proposals gained support from lawmakers concerned about executive overreach, they have not yet been fully enacted into law. Consequently, many of the structural concerns surrounding accountability, concentrated political power, and emergency authority remain unresolved.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Congressional Term Limits Amendment

One potential reform is the implementation of congressional term limits through a constitutional amendment. Proposed limits could include three terms for members of the House of Representatives and two terms for Senators. Supporters argue that term limits would reduce entrenched political power, increase electoral competition, and create opportunities for newer

leadership and perspectives.

Critics, however, contend that term limits may reduce legislative experience and shift more influence toward lobbyists or unelected staff members. Despite these concerns, supporters maintain that the benefits of increased accountability and reduced concentration of power outweigh the drawbacks.

National Emergencies Review Act

Under this proposal, any national emergency declared by the president would automatically undergo judicial review by the Supreme Court to determine whether the situation meets the legal standard of a genuine national emergency. A simple majority vote of the Court would be required to uphold the declaration, while Congress would retain the ability to override the Court's decision through a two-thirds majority vote in both chambers.

These reforms would preserve the president's ability to respond rapidly during legitimate crises while preventing the misuse of emergency powers for political or partisan purposes. Supporters believe this proposal would reinforce the constitutional system of checks and balances by ensuring that emergency declarations face both judicial and legislative oversight.

Congressional Compensation and Lobbying Reform

Another policy option involves reforming congressional compensation and lobbying regulations to increase accountability within the legislative branch. Proposed reforms include temporarily withholding congressional salaries during government shutdowns or when Congress fails to pass a federal budget by established deadlines, alongside stricter lobbying disclosure requirements and limitations on campaign

contributions from large political action committees.

These changes would create stronger incentives for lawmakers to fulfill essential legislative responsibilities while reducing the influence of wealthy donors and lobbying organizations over policymaking. Supporters believe these reforms would strengthen public trust in government and encourage elected officials to prioritize constituents over political or financial interests.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This policy brief examines how weakened accountability in American governance has contributed to concentrated political power, expanded executive authority, and declining public trust in democratic institutions. Through issues such as long congressional tenure, lobbying influence, and broad emergency powers, structural weaknesses have emerged across multiple branches of government.

Among the proposed reforms, strengthening oversight of emergency powers and implementing congressional term limits appear to be the most effective approaches for restoring institutional balance and increasing political accountability. While no reform can completely eliminate political division or abuse of power, stronger checks and clearer limits on authority would reinforce democratic principles.

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