

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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### Opening Statement Chairman Elijah E. Cummings

#### Hearing on “H.R. 1: Strengthening Ethics Rules for the Executive Branch” February 6, 2019

Today, we are holding a hearing on H.R. 1, the For the People Act.

H.R. 1 was introduced by Congressman John Sarbanes, a senior Member of our Committee. We thank him for his vision and tenacity. He has compiled one of the boldest reform packages to be considered in the history of this body.

This sweeping legislation will clean up corruption in government, fight secret money in politics, and make it easier for American citizens across this country to vote.

I believe that we should be doing everything in our power to make it easier for eligible American citizens to exercise their constitutional right to vote—not harder. We should be making it more convenient—not less. We should be encouraging more people to cast their votes—not fewer. We should be promoting early voting, absentee voting, voting by mail, and other ways to help citizens cast their votes—not rolling back these programs.

Unfortunately, some people disagree, including most Republicans. They think we should make it harder to vote. They think we should make it more difficult by cutting back on early voting, eliminating polling places, and taking other steps to reduce the number of people who vote. Especially troubling, in some cases, they have engaged in illegal efforts to suppress the vote that target minority communities. For example:

- North Carolina drew legislative districts that the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals found target African-Americans “with almost surgical precision.”
- Georgia kept eligible individuals off the rolls and caused widespread problems with wait times and absentee ballots, particularly in areas with significant minority populations.
- Kansas moved to the outskirts of town the one and only polling place for 27,000 residents of Dodge City, most of whom are minorities.

H.R. 1 would address many of these problems. The bill would institute procedures to automatically register eligible voters and put in place protections to keep them on the correct

voter rolls. It would provide for expanded early voting and absentee voting and give additional funding to states to maintain enough polling sites so everyone can easily go cast their ballot.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has described H.R. 1 as a “power grab” by Democrats. He is right about one thing—it is a power grab. But it is not by Democrats. It is by American citizens who voted for reform in last November’s elections and sent a clear message that they want to exercise their constitutional right to vote without interference.

Today, our hearing will focus on the part of H.R. 1 that is in our jurisdiction—Title VIII—which puts in place strong new reforms for the Executive Branch.

For example, Title VIII includes a bill that I introduced called the Executive Branch Ethics Reform Act. It would ban senior officials from accepting “golden parachute” payments from private sector employers in exchange for their government service.

This would have prevented Gary Cohn from receiving more than \$100 million in accelerated payments from Goldman Sachs while leading the Trump Administration’s efforts to slash corporate taxes.

Title VIII also includes another bill I introduced, the Transition Team Ethics Improvement Act, with Senator Carper and Senator Warren. This legislation would require transition teams to have ethics plans in place and make those plans publicly available.

Title VIII also would prohibit senior federal employees from working on matters that affect the financial interests of their former employers or prospective employers. They could obtain waivers for this requirement, but those waivers would have to be made public.

Title VIII also would make clear that Congress expects the President to divest his business holdings—just as every single President since Jimmy Carter has done—and place them in an independent and truly blind trust.

Both Democratic and Republican ethics experts warned President Trump to do this years ago, but he refused. They warned that every decision he made could be questioned, and the American people would rightly wonder whether he was serving the nation’s interests or his own financial interests. Unfortunately, that is exactly what has happened over the past two years.

The American people gave this Congress and this Committee a mandate to restore our democracy and clean up our government. They want greater transparency and accountability in our government.

H.R. 1 makes good on that promise. It is a broad and brave step towards restoring a government that works “For the People.”

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