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Statement by CSPC President and CEO Glenn Nye on the Health of Our Democracy

It has been an eventful period for those who study the relationship between the presidency and congress. We have witnessed deeply troubling historic events and the violent culmination of a long and escalating period of deception and radicalization of the American people—by the sitting president and other office holders. In a time of great challenge to our country's health, economics, and social well-being, it is perhaps the risk to our democracy that remains most troubling. In a recent [Ipsos/Axios poll](#), nearly 80% of Americans, members of both parties, agree that "America is falling apart." Though that sentiment may subside somewhat as the fresh images of an insurrectionist assault on the U.S. Capitol fade from daily news coverage, it should be clear that urgent work lies ahead to restore the health of our American democracy. These should be the top areas for our national attention:

Bringing accountability to those who fomented and perpetrated violent insurrection on January 6, 2021

Federal law enforcement prosecution of the insurrectionists who took part in a violent attack on the Capitol has begun and will be a critical part of maintaining the rule of law. Appropriate accountability for the president and politicians who fomented the mob will also send an important signal to future presidents that physical intimidation of the Article One branch of the government by the president, or other political figures, will not be tolerated. The House of Representatives passed an article of impeachment for the president's role in inciting insurrection, attracting historic levels of support from members of the president's own party, representing one avenue of accountability. This historic second impeachment was warranted, but it represents only an indictment or accusation against the president, leaving a final determination of whether to convict the president for the charge up to the Senate, and drawing the issue out well into the new president's term. It also leaves open the question of whether the president will be barred from holding future office.

Preventing further violence by putting to rest the destructive lie that the election was stolen

This is now the most urgent task before us, for we cannot heal or move on until this lie is undone. Impeaching the president is a method of bringing accountability on the act of inciting insurrection, but it does not deal directly with the lie upon which the insurrection was built: the notion invented by the president—and fostered, whether directly or obliquely, by many of his political allies—that the 2020 presidential election was a fraud. Sadly, this deception has led millions of people to believe that their election was stolen from them, and as long as they hold this lie delegitimizing our democratic system, how can we heal? In addition to showing no remorse for inciting violence, President Trump, subsequent to the attack on the capitol, maintained the lie as justification for violent insurrection, saying "These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away." One hundred and forty Members of the United States Congress voted to sustain that lie even after the attack. Though the president subsequently appealed for an end to violence, he has refused to retract the lie. If left uncured, that lie will metastasize and prevent our national recovery.

It is likely that only the president recanting the lie—or a critical mass of the Members of Congress who objected to the electoral vote count clearly stating that the election

was won by Joe Biden—would significantly deflate the false notion that the election was a sham. Some of those members have now publicly said that Biden won the election, but most still have not. One possible solution would be for congressional leaders, including those from the president’s party, to offer the possibility of avoiding a lifetime ban on holding office if the president will correct the lie and tell the American people the election was not stolen. Such a statement made before the inauguration of his successor might serve to calm tensions and potentially avoid additional violence.

Corporate and other political donors clearly identified the continuation of the false notion of a stolen election as a threat to a functioning democracy and profoundly increased their political profiles by calling out politicians who coddle that notion. Their efforts are important as a counterbalance for politicians who remain under extreme pressure from their base voters not to concede the election. Their efforts to influence elected officials will be most effective if donors who cut off members who voted to object on January 6, in turn reinstate members who will publicly say the election was not fraudulent.

Reform a political system that incentivizes pandering to the extreme fringes

While 80% of Americans worry that extremism is a big problem in the United States, we maintain a political system that elevates extremism in its influence over political leaders. Closed primary systems, gerrymandering congressional districts “safe” from general election competition, and winner-take-all elections place outsized political power and influence on those voters who demand the most extreme approaches to politics. Accountability to truth and basic function of government take a back seat in priority to waging scorched earth political battles and avoiding compromise at all costs. Corporate and large donor activism to bring accountability to the health of our democracy are welcome developments, but without systemic changes bending the incentives toward a better approach, it will be difficult to overcome politicians’ twisted incentives to pander to extreme voters. The good news is that reforms that can improve the function of our politics are well known and are being put into use in states across the country. Corporate and major donor attention to the issue of gerrymandering would be a great focus for the coming year, as most states will draw legislative maps in 2021 and the legislatures responsible for the drawing in most states may be willing to draw responsible fair maps if there is sufficient attention on the process.

Bring accountability to politicians who radicalize voters with disinformation, and pay more attention the health of our democracy

In addition to reforming systemic incentives, ideally private and public-sector leaders will be more willing to draw red lines on the radicalization of voters by politicians who peddle conspiracy theories—or tacitly support politicians who do. It is most challenging and also most important for politicians to set boundaries for members of their own political party, Media companies should practice some restraint in the promulgation of radicalizing ideas that are demonstrably false. Social media companies need to bear a greater responsibility for allowing their platforms to be used as tools for radicalizing politics, spreading disinformation, and organizing violence. Recent corporate activism has demonstrated that our society does have antibodies to the most extreme behaviors, despite the failure of our political leaders to prevent things from going too far. Still, earlier identification and intervention of the radicalization of voters and consequences for politicians who engage in such radicalization will be important as we seek to better the environment for our politics and set our country on a better path.

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The Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress (CSPC) is a non-partisan think tank that addresses the key challenges facing our nation through studying the lessons of history, convening decision makers from government and the private sector, and educating the next generation of leaders.