

ANALYSIS

Trump's Misleading Pitch for the SAVE Act

The State of the Union will likely feature false claims about voter fraud.



Michael Waldman

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[Voting & Elections](#)

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President Trump will deliver the State of the Union address tonight. This year's event is more fraught than usual. Trump gives the speech as a lame duck — but a weird kind of lame duck, one that tries to rule by fiat.

One thing the White House has made clear: He will urge burdensome new voting restrictions. Expect them to be buttressed by false claims of voter fraud.

The speech comes at a jarring time. Public approval of Trump's presidency has collapsed. Six in ten [disapprove](#) [\[link-2\]](#) of Trump's performance — the highest since the January 6 insurrection —

according to a *Washington Post* poll. A CNN poll shows only [26 percent](#) [\[link-3\]](#) of independents approve.

The Supreme Court [just ruled](#) [\[link-4\]](#) that the “Liberation Day” tariffs, the centerpiece of the president’s economic policy, were illegal. Rampaging ICE agents have appalled and galvanized millions. And Trump stands before Congress after [trying to arrest](#) [\[link-5\]](#) six lawmakers for engaging in constitutionally protected speech — a move so egregious that not a single grand juror would vote for it. Rest assured the members of Congress have not forgotten.

I was chief White House speechwriter and worked with President Bill Clinton on four of these addresses. They can resemble eloquent laundry lists, stuffed with policy minutiae. (I joked that we would install a round keyboard in my office, so everyone

could type at once.) At their best, they can sharpen issues and summon policy goals. On that rostrum, Franklin D. Roosevelt called for “Four Freedoms,” John F. Kennedy announced the goal of sending a man to the moon, and Ronald Reagan drew bipartisan applause just weeks after being shot.

Clinton used the address to unveil big new policy proposals, such as his call to use the new budget surplus to “save Social Security first.” George W. Bush launched the run-up to the Iraq War in the wake of 9/11, decrying an “axis of evil.”

In his first term, Trump’s joint session addresses were oddly . . . normal. “Teleprompter Trump” would dutifully praise bipartisan legislation, such as criminal justice reform.

Yet Trump right now has few legislative goals. We expect he will call for Congress to pass the

current version of the SAVE Act, which could block [tens of millions](#) [\[link-6\]](#) of eligible Americans from voting. From the same spot where Lyndon B. Johnson proposed the Voting Rights Act, he will demand legislation to curtail voting. The House has passed the bill, and now Trump urges the Senate to require a “talking filibuster,” in which lawmakers must actually orate rather than merely threatening to do so. Opponents are ready to take to the floor and fight this bill restricting the freedom to vote.

More generally, though, he *wants* to govern by executive action, even when he could seek legislation from a Congress controlled by his party. War with Iran? Tariffs? Lawmakers would flee if forced to actually, you know, vote on stuff.

Congress’s failure to do its job is the biggest story in American politics. Its retreat from relevance creates a

vacuum filled by executive abuse and Supreme Court overreach.

Whether it’s supine Republicans or Democrats engaging in stunts (as when Speaker Nancy Pelosi theatrically ripped up the text of Trump’s 2020 speech), often neither party seems serious. Lawmakers are supposed to be more than extras in a big crowd scene, cheering or scowling. The speech should launch the legislative season, where the real work of governing is supposed to get done.

Every so often, pundits sneer that the address is a relic, that it should be given on video or PowerPoint, that nobody watches. That’s not true. Last year 36 million people tuned in, and 32 million watched Biden’s the year before. That doesn’t even count those who watched online or through social media.

The State of the Union address is actually in the Constitution. It ought not just showcase partisan rancor.

Despite the bombast, this is a civic ritual worth keeping and worth

respecting with a real legislative agenda.

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Links

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link-2: disapprove <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/02/22/trump-disapproval-post-poll/>

link-3: 26 percent <https://www.cnn.com/2026/02/23/politics/trump-approval-rating-independents-cnn-poll>

link-4: just ruled https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/25pdf/24-1287_4gcj.pdf?inline=1

link-5: trying to arrest <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/10/us/politics/trump-democrats-illegal-orders-pirro.html>

link-6: tens of millions <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/new-save-act-bills-would-still-block-millions-americans-voting>