The Constitution will endure as a vital charter of human liberty as long as there are those with the courage to defend it, the vision to interpret it, and the fidelity to live by it.

—U.S. Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr.
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Dear Friends,

In the great fight for the future of constitutional democracy, 2018 was a breakthrough year.

Amid the chaos and crises – the deepening threats to our values, to our systems of governance – the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law stepped forward as a leading national force for change.

The Center has forged a distinct model – part think tank, part legal advocacy group, part communications hub. Independent. Rigorous. Fighting fear with facts. A generator of bold thinking, critical research, and innovative solutions to reform and revitalize our nation’s systems of democracy and justice.

Our work bore fruit. Defying brazen vote suppression, citizens surged to the polls – the highest midterm turnout since 1914. Voters made clear: the best response to an attack on democracy is to strengthen democracy.

In Florida, voters ended the lifetime disenfranchisement of 1.4 million citizens with a past felony conviction. Nevada and Michigan enacted automatic voter registration – becoming the 14th and 15th states to pass this signature Brennan Center reform. We drafted or advised on ballot measures to curb partisan gerrymandering that passed in Michigan, Missouri, Colorado, and Utah. By December, we celebrated passage of the most meaningful federal criminal justice reform in a generation, the FIRST STEP Act.

It is the beginning of a true democracy movement in America. Now we’re fighting to seize this opportunity, in Congress and states. It’s an agenda-setting moment that will help shape the upcoming presidential race and build momentum for change.

The Brennan Center will do its part to hold American institutions accountable to the ideals of equality and justice for all. When the systems fall short, as they surely have, we will fight to change them. That is how the country will be able to solve the most pressing problems of our times. Thank you for your steadfast partnership and support.

Robert Atkins,
Co-Chair, Board of Directors

Patricia Bauman,
Co-Chair, Board of Directors

Michael Waldman,
President
Today, our democracy faces steep challenges. The worst voting cutbacks since the Jim Crow era. Dark money. Gerrymandering.

The Brennan Center works to uphold the heart of the Declaration of Independence — that government is legitimate only when it rests on “the consent of the governed.” To ensure that all Americans have an equal voice in elections and in the halls of power. To overturn barriers to participation.

Most important, we craft reforms that will change politics by expanding access to the process. If we want to solve the country’s problems, we must fix the systems.

**Advancing Innovative Solutions**

**Automatic Voter Registration.**
Over a decade ago, the Brennan Center crafted this transformative reform: All eligible voters are registered unless they opt out. Fully implemented, automatic registration will add tens of millions to the voting rolls, save money, and boost security. It’s now the law in fifteen states and D.C. In 2018, voters in Nevada and Michigan endorsed it, and legislatures in Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Washington enacted it.

**Election Security.**
Russia attacked American democracy in 2016. The Brennan Center helps lead a bipartisan coalition of national security and election experts to protect against more cyberattacks. Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and James Lankford (R-OK) introduced the Secure Elections Act based on our plan. In March, we persuaded Congress to give states $380 million to strengthen security. Our solutions: paper-verified voting machines, post-election audits, and backup plans to count every vote in 2020.
Curbing Big Money’s Role in Politics.
The Brennan Center has long been a legal and policy force for campaign finance reform. Our October study showed that outside dark money groups funded by anonymous donors now dominate statewide judicial races – the latest example of the impact of Citizens United. Our proposal to overhaul the Federal Election Commission would fix the agency which has failed to enforce campaign laws. Lawmakers have embraced the plan.

Bold Democracy Reform.
In December 2018, House Democrats announced the first order of business — H.R. 1 — an overhaul of our nation’s democratic systems. The Brennan Center’s solutions are the heart of the plan, which marks the first time in decades that members of Congress have prioritized fixing democracy.


Protecting the Vote

Defeating Trump’s Voter Fraud Commission.
We fought the White House panel that aimed to bolster the preposterous claim that millions voted illegally in 2016. Our report, Noncitizen Voting: The Missing Millions, demolished Trump’s lies. We filed cases in Texas, Utah, and Indiana to block release of private voter information; we sued federal agencies to uncover secret documents; and we executed a top-flight communications campaign. When the Commission imploded in January 2018, the Guardian reported: “The Brennan Center was at the forefront of resistance to the Commission’s work.”

Stopping Abusive Voter Purges.
Our definitive study — released in July with a New York Times op-ed — showed how states removed 14 million voters from the rolls, often improperly. Voters of color were hardest hit. After the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013, officials purged an extra 2 million voters. We went to court in Indiana and won, and blocked purges in two other states.

Countering Vote Suppression.
In Georgia and Florida, we won emergency lawsuits that forced officials to count every vote. And we helped combat Brian Kemp’s notorious “exact match” rule that disenfranchised voters due to typos.

Making Every Voice Count

Ending Partisan Gerrymandering.
Politicians long have rigged election districts to benefit themselves and their party, and to stifle minority voices. Modern technology makes the problem worse.

As the reform movement’s litigation hub, the Brennan Center coordinated dozens of amicus briefs in two key Supreme Court cases to strike down extreme partisan gerrymandering. We brought in historians, Republican leaders, civil rights advocates and social scientists.

Disappointingly, the Justices declined to rule, so citizens themselves stepped in. Ballot measures established nonpartisan commissions to draw district lines in Michigan, Colorado, and Nevada. Missouri and Utah voters enacted solid redistricting reforms. The Brennan Center drafted several of these and gave essential research and legal support.

Ensuring a Fair, Accurate 2020 Census.
The Trump administration illegally and abruptly added a question about citizenship, a demand that will crash participation by immigrant communities. Privacy risks abound, too. The Brennan Center co-chairs a legal strategy task force, working with racial justice and fair elections groups to advance protections and ensure a full count.
Why does gerrymandering matter?
The way that political maps are drawn has consequences far beyond just determining the geographic area of an election district. Map boundaries can be manipulated to discriminate against communities of color, and against political opponents. And the United States is unique in that it largely leaves redistricting in the hands of partisan lawmakers, which intensifies those problems. The good news is that even small changes to the system make the process more independent and fair. It is possible to create legislative bodies at the state and federal level that are much more reflective of our increasingly diverse country. One way to do it is to put line drawing in the hands of independent commissions, but there are lots of smart reforms to make the process much better.

What have been some of the biggest fights in the effort to create fairer political representation?
First, trying to get the Supreme Court to articulate a strong, clear rule against partisan gerrymandering. Lawmakers have taken the Court’s silence up until now as a sign they can get away with anything when it comes to favoring one political party over another. Cases are continuing to come up through the lower courts and the Supreme Court won’t be able to punt the issue forever. But the fight isn’t just in the courts. There’s also been a powerful uptick of grassroots state advocacy and reform. And those efforts are scoring increasingly big wins.

Have you noticed an increase in public awareness of gerrymandering as a problem?
It’s been a sea change. Five or ten years ago, there was scant public awareness of gerrymandering. Now, it’s an issue people care deeply about. That’s partially because Americans have this feeling that the system is corrupt, rigged for the benefit of insiders. But people are starting to realize that it’s something they can change. It’s become an issue for our time.

How did you become a gerrymandering expert?
Coming from Texas, I’ve long known that communities of color are underrepresented in ways that harm them. I was practicing at a big law firm in the state, and another round of redistricting was coming up. The map-drawing process is fairly opaque, and I thought people should know more about it. So, I created a blog that aimed to help people understand redistricting better and have more access to information about it. It evolved from there.
The United States has less than 5 percent of the world’s population, but nearly 25 percent of the world’s prisoners — 2.3 million people. And that’s not needed to keep communities safe. Mass incarceration has crushing consequences: racial, economic, social. Black men and women are still five and a half times more likely to be incarcerated than whites. It is among the most pressing racial justice issues facing the nation.

The Brennan Center fights for a rational, fair and effective justice system that fulfills the promise of equal justice under law. We work to end mass incarceration and policies that unfairly target immigrants and communities of color.

Ending Mass Incarceration

Fighting Fear with Facts. The Brennan Center is the respected source to rebut false claims of soaring crime — the antidote to politicians who stoke fear to undercut reform. Our 2018 research shows that crime rates in America’s 30 largest cities remain near historic lows.

Mobilizing Law Enforcement. We launched Law Enforcement Leaders to Reduce Crime and Incarceration in 2015. Its members: 200 police chiefs and top prosecutors from all 50 states who agree that sound criminal justice reforms can reduce incarceration without jeopardizing public safety. They work for change in their communities and are a powerful voice in states and on Capitol Hill. Senate Judiciary Committee chair Charles Grassley (R-IA) called the group his “best advocate” for achieving criminal justice reform.

Winning Federal Sentencing Reform. In December, Congress enacted the FIRST STEP Act, the most meaningful federal criminal justice
 reform in a generation. Our influential role: We opposed a House bill because it lacked sentencing reform. With a strong bipartisan group of Senate sponsors, we pushed hard for a better plan. Once the Senate added provisions to cut the number of people entering prison, we mobilized support: The New York Times cited our views in key editorials; Law Enforcement Leaders gave politically vital backing; Sen. Doug Jones (D-AL), a former member of our group, praised the Brennan Center on the Senate floor.

Crafting State and Local Reform.
As the federal law passed, we issued a slate of model state reforms – the only comprehensive package focused on reducing prison populations. It would cut imprisonment nationwide by 39 percent without risking public safety.

In December, Congress enacted the FIRST STEP Act, the most meaningful criminal justice reform in a generation.

In 21 Principles for the 21st Century Prosecutor, published with Fair and Just Prosecution and New York Times reporter Emily Bazelon, we offer practical steps for prosecutors to transform their profession – to mete out justice and mercy.

Restoring Voting Rights for Formerly Incarcerated People
An ugly remnant of Jim Crow, Florida had a lifetime ban on voting for anyone convicted of a felony. More than 1.4 million could not vote – disproportionately people of color. One in five black Floridians were permanently disenfranchised.

The Brennan Center challenged Florida’s law two decades ago. We lost in court then, but pressed on. Three years ago, our experts helped write Amendment 4 to take the question to the people. A remarkable coalition – civil rights groups, faith leaders, conservatives, and formerly incarcerated people themselves – fought tenaciously to get the measure on the ballot and to garner public support.

On Election Day, it won a resounding victory – passing with 65 percent of the vote. This is the single greatest expansion of voting rights since passage of the 26th Amendment in 1971.
The restoration of voting rights to Florida residents with previous felony convictions was a monumental advance. How did that come about? It was decades in the making. It came from the commitment of many, many people — persons formerly incarcerated, activists, funders and scholars. The Brennan Center sued the state two decades ago but didn’t prevail. We kept at it. After years of advocacy the coalition decided to try a constitutional amendment. We conducted research and worked with groups on the ground to draft its language. It needed 60 percent to pass. In the end, it got 64 percent. Election Day was indescribably moving. My religious faith tells me that people can be transformed. The idea that a vote could transform people — it changes someone from an outsider to a citizen — is something that is really easy to get behind.

What moves you to do this work? The great civil rights historian Taylor Branch always calls the vote “a little piece of nonviolence.” I believe in the power of the vote. I believe in the commitment that our country makes to resolving our political differences. People who vote say, “I care about my country, and it’s part of my right and responsibility to influence the direction of the country.”

When I was young, my Tía Rosie used to take me to vote when she voted on my way to school. I love voting. I love being with my neighbors. I love going into my firehouse and seeing other people who care. I love the poll workers, even when they mess up. I think the vote is a tangible and powerful symbol of the best of what this country can be.

Now, in my office at the Brennan Center, I have photos of LBJ signing the Voting Rights Act, RFK, Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Dr. King. They remind us not to be wimpy in our pursuit of justice. It’s not supposed to be easy. It’s supposed to be hard.

How can we make it easier for all people to participate in our democracy? We need to fundamentally reform our justice system so that it is more fair and effective. And we need to end the disenfranchisement of Americans in our communities who have criminal convictions in their past. We should adopt reforms like automatic voter registration. We can increase early voting opportunities. And we can provide more public education about the importance of voting. The incredibly high turnout in 2018 is a strong signal to me that Americans have said, “enough!” But we have a long way to go.
Our country is stronger when we protect fundamental freedoms. But today, the constitutional order is under threat. Rules are broken. Rights are violated. Checks and balances are ignored. Too often, it feels as if we are one tweet away from a constitutional crisis.

The Brennan Center’s vision: The Constitution as a charter for a robust democracy, marked by equality, where fundamental freedoms are safeguarded and abuse curbed.

**Defending the Rule of Law**

**Checking Executive Power.**

Democracy depends on unwritten norms – invisible guardrails that protect against abuse. Donald Trump routinely smashes these norms. Yet he’s not the first president to upend constitutional tradition. And as has happened throughout history, reform will follow.

In 2018, the Brennan Center set out to turn these soft norms into hard law. We launched the National Task Force on Rule of Law & Democracy, co-chaired by former U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara and former New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman. Former senators, governors, and top officials from both parties crafted a plan to restore the rule of law.

Among its provisions: new laws to require candidates for president and vice president to release personal and business tax returns.
Ethics rules, applied for the first time to the president. A stronger Office of Government Ethics. And protections for the independence of law enforcement, including a law to shield special counsels from arbitrary firing.

Checking Presidential Emergency Powers. In December, ahead of President Trump’s declaration of an emergency, The Atlantic published our yearlong investigation, based on work with a bipartisan group of former national security officials and civil libertarians. It catalogued 136 statutes that give a president vast power in case of crisis, actual or imagined. They cover almost every imaginable subject area, including the military, land use, public health, trade, federal pay schedules, agriculture, transportation, communications, and criminal law. The President’s declaration highlights the space for potential approach reform of the legal system for national emergencies.

Ensuring Religious Freedom
Combating Profiling and Discrimination. When the Trump White House announced its Muslim travel ban in 2017, the Brennan Center fought back. We represent Eblal Zakzok, a professor and Syrian refugee whose daughter is blocked from joining her family in the United States. Despite setbacks, court proceedings continue. Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s dissent in Trump v. Hawaii relied on information unearthed by a Brennan Center lawsuit.

Our work goes deeper: We did research that exposed a bureaucratic response that serves as a de facto Muslim ban, “extreme vetting” of visitors. We helped block an Immigration and Customs Enforcement plan to use over-reaching software algorithms and online monitoring as a vetting tool.

Protecting the Integrity of the Courts
Fair and Impartial Courts. A fair and impartial justice system is at great risk in America. Most Americans think cash rules the courts — and alarmingly, so do nearly half of state judges. State and federal courts don’t reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. Today, courts are a battleground for politics, with dark money flowing into judicial races, and repeated attacks on judges and the legitimacy of our judicial system from government’s highest levels.

The Brennan Center fights to protect the courts from politicization — convening experts, publishing proposals for reform, and calling out what’s at stake when judicial independence is threatened.

“Most Americans think cash rules the courts — and alarmingly, so do nearly half of state judges.”
Why does the president have emergency powers? These powers are based on a sound idea: that ordinary laws might not be enough in a true crisis. That's because emergencies are, by their nature, unpredictable. Emergency powers are meant to fill that gap, to give the president additional flexibility for a temporary period.

When President Trump declared a national emergency to secure money to build the border wall, you had just published a trove of research. How did you achieve such perfect timing? When Trump was elected, I immediately thought, “What if 9/11 happened under this president’s watch?” My fears were exacerbated when Trump issued the Muslim ban, because that was an emergency response in the absence of any emergency whatsoever. So, I started researching emergency powers, and it didn’t take long for me to discover weaknesses in our existing legal framework.

What keeps you up at night? Emergency powers! It’s the president’s broad authority to declare a national emergency and the powers he acquires when he does that. If he abused emergency powers in a significant way, that could do serious and even lasting damage to democracy and the rule of law.

I’ve been worried about other things since long before Trump was elected. Before 9/11, intelligence and law enforcement agencies operated on the principle that they would not collect private information on Americans or conduct surveillance on them unless there was a reason to suspect wrongdoing. There was no bulk collection of information on Americans. That has really changed. Protections were dismantled, leading to surveillance of Muslim Americans and other abuses.

I am also alarmed by the anti-immigrant sentiment that this president has inflamed in the country. I have 8-year-old twins who attend a bilingual school where half of their class is native Spanish speakers. When Trump was elected, they knew they had classmates with family members who were at risk of deportation. There’s no way to hide it in that setting.

What’s next on your plate? This is a real moment to start developing and advocating for policy changes to build checks and balances into the emergency powers legal system.
Shaping the Narrative

Winning legal and policy change starts with winning in the court of public opinion. That’s why Brennan Center has forged a new organizational model that incorporates cutting-edge communications work as a central strategy. Our experts authored 21 publications in 2018, groundbreaking work that more than doubled our press coverage year-on-year.

OVER THE PAST YEAR

OVERALL MEDIA COVERAGE
↑53%

COVERAGE IN THE NEW YORK TIMES
↑87%

COVERAGE IN THE WASHINGTON POST
↑46%

COVERAGE IN POLITICO
↑66%

OVER

1.5 MILLION PEOPLE VISITED OUR WEBSITE IN 2018

FOR A TOTAL OF

4.1 MILLION PAGE VIEWS

OUR TWITTER AUDIENCE GREW TO

109,000 TIMES

OUR TWEETS WERE VIEWED

1.5 MILLION

74,000,000
Van Jones in Conversation with Darren Walker
CNN’s Van Jones (right) and Ford Foundation president Darren Walker discussed mass incarceration and the fight for social and legal change in a polarized America.

New Ideas, New Audiences
The Brennan Center hosted more than 30 public events and discussions in 2018 — providing fuel for new thinking, while sharpening persuasive arguments aimed at lawmakers and the public alike.
Trouble Makers
Cecile Richards, former Planned Parenthood President (right), and Alyssa Mastromonaco, President Obama’s deputy chief of staff, discussed the new power of women in politics.

Revolution Unfinished
Fifty years after the assassination of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., former Rep. Donna Edwards (D-MD) and former Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele (right) joined Brennan Center Fellow Ted Johnson to reflect on King’s life and legacy.

The Constitution vs. Trumpism
From left, lawyers Elizabeth Wydra (president, Constitutional Accountability Center), Neal Katyal (former acting solicitor general of the U.S.) and Brennan Center’s Faiza Patel (co-director, Liberty & National Security Program), gathered to discuss challenges to the rule of law in 2018.
An Uncivil War: Taking Back Our Democracy

*Washington Post* opinion reporter Greg Sargent (below left) discusses the Trump era with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Robert Schenkkan, author of plays “All the Way” and “The Kentucky Cycle.” The two discussed President Trump’s role in a democratic crisis of hyper-partisanship, dismal civic engagement, and foreign interference in our elections.

The 2020 Census: What’s at Stake

From left, Brennan Center’s Wendy Weiser joined Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund’s Thomas Saenz, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights’ Vanita Gupta, and New York City official Joseph J. Salvo.

Trumpocracy: David Frum in Conversation with Trevor Morrison

Conservative writer David Frum (left) joined NYU Law Dean Trevor Morrison to examine how President Trump and his administration have undermined our most important public institutions — media freedom, judicial independence, and the right to have one’s vote counted fairly.
**The Equal Rights Amendment: A Century in the Making**

The Brennan Center examined the renewed push to enshrine gender equality in the Constitution and ratify the ERA. From left, Irin Carmon, co-author of *Notorious RBG*; Brennan Center’s John Kowal; Carol Jenkins, co-president and CEO of the ERA Coalition; Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, Brennan Center’s inaugural Women and Democracy fellow, and Jamia Wilson, executive director of the Feminist Press.

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**How Voter Suppression is Damaging Our Democracy**

Emory University Professor Carol Anderson (left) and former NAACP President Cornell William Brooks, now at the Harvard Kennedy School, discuss the history of voter suppression.

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**Carnegie Hall Festival on the 1960s: Voting Rights Then and Now**

In partnership with Carnegie Hall, the Brennan Center hosted legendary journalist and LBJ aide Bill Moyers (left), with Kristen Clarke of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.
The annual Brennan Legacy Awards Dinner pays tribute to the legacy of Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. by celebrating business and civic leaders who exemplify his values and vision.

On November 13, 2018, we honored former U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York Preet Bharara and former New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman for their lifelong commitment to public service and shared leadership of the National Task Force on Rule of Law & Democracy. We also honored the company Salesforce as a vital force at the intersection of social justice, corporate responsibility, and technology.
TOP LEFT: Michael Waldman, President of Brennan Center for Justice.

BOTTOM LEFT: From left, Brennan Center’s Myrna Pérez; Sascha Rand, partner, Quinn Emanuel; director of Brennan Center’s Washington, D.C. office Spencer Boyer; and Jon Oblak, partner, Quinn Emanuel.

TOP RIGHT: New York State Attorney General Letitia James with Preet Bharara.

MIDDLE RIGHT: From left, Brennan Center’s Natalie Tennant and Brennan Center board co-chair Patricia Bauman with Christine Todd Whitman.

BOTTOM RIGHT: From left, Brennan Center board co-chair Bob Atkins; Amy Weaver of Salesforce; and Brennan Center board member Franz Paasche.
In 2018, the Brennan Center grew to meet the challenges of the political era. Our strong fiscal management and fundraising have undergirded the steady, successful growth of the organization. We are now a staff of 115 which includes a mix of attorneys, researchers, social scientists, economists, former election officials, social media experts, graphic designers, and award-winning writers and editors.

The Brennan Center is grateful for the in-kind and pro bono support provided by the law firm community. The monetary value of those services is not included in this chart.
Our 2018 revenues include funds raised above our annual budget for the Brennan Legacy Fund and Inez Milholland Endowment for Democracy.
The Brennan Center would like to thank those who so generously supported our work in 2018, with special recognition of the following leaders:*  

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