

# The Undemocratic National Endowment for Democracy Needs Oversight and Reform

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The National Endowment for Democracy is required by law to be bipartisan, but it discriminates against Republicans and conservatives in its hiring practices.

The NED excludes conservatives and Republicans from taxpayer-funded events and fora and promotes leftwing causes.

The NED duplicates functions and capacities already present in government agencies and departments and should be defunded.

**T**he National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is an institution established and funded by Congress to promote democracy abroad. Although required to be bipartisan, and to reflect “the diversity of American society,”<sup>1</sup> it is led and staffed almost entirely by Democrats, and its public programs feature mostly Democrat speakers and discussants, suggesting intentional viewpoint and employment discrimination against conservatives and Republicans. In a rejection of democratic pluralism, NED board members and “experts” have sought to delegitimize the Republican party. Through its grants program, the NED has supported development of the international “disinformation industrial complex”—including one grantee that sought to censor and suppress conservative speech in the United States in advance of the 2020 and 2022 elections.<sup>2</sup>

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/bg3844>

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In 2019, the NED's budget exploded from \$180 million to \$300 million.<sup>3</sup> Since the organizations the NED supports can also receive grants from other agencies of the U.S. government, it unnecessarily duplicates existing capabilities, and its annual appropriation can be cut without affecting U.S. capability to support democracy abroad. If Congress continues to support the NED, its political discrimination in hiring and role in censoring U.S. citizens should be investigated by the State Department's Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office—and Congress should require the NED to reflect the diversity of political thought in America in both its hiring, publications, and its events.

## Founding the National Endowment for Democracy

The National Endowment for Democracy was established by Congress in 1983 as a bipartisan, private nonprofit corporation and grants-making organization to conduct overseas democracy activities “in places where the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) or other official entities are limited by law or diplomatic considerations.”<sup>4</sup> The NED receives an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress through the U.S. Department of State as well as a small amount in private contributions.

The purposes of the NED are elaborated in the original legislation:

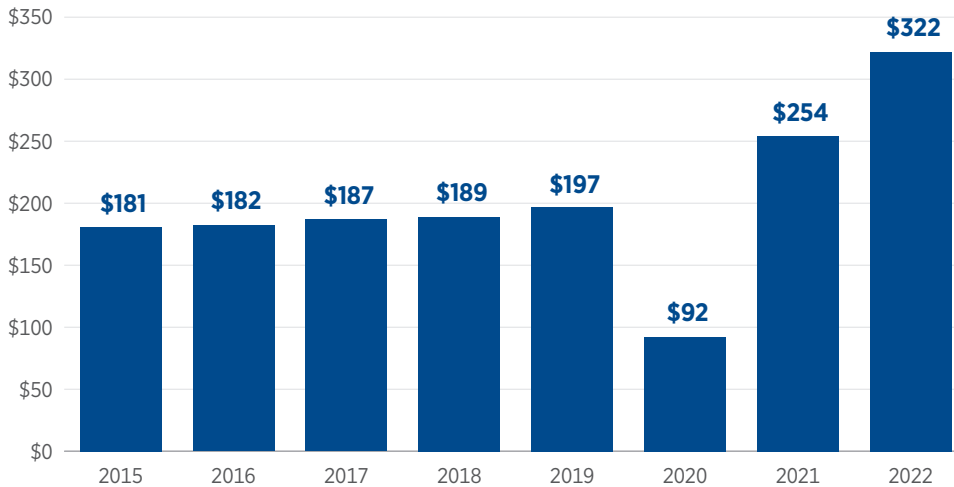
- “[T]o encourage free and democratic institutions throughout the world through private sector initiatives, including activities which promote the individual rights and freedoms, (including internationally recognized human rights) which are essential to the functioning of democratic institutions”;<sup>5</sup>
- “[T]o promote United States nongovernmental participation (especially through the two major American political parties, labor, business, and other private sector groups) in democratic training programs and democratic institution-building abroad”;<sup>6</sup> and
- “[T]o encourage the establishment and growth of democratic development in a manner consistent both with the broad concerns of United States national interests and with the specific requirements of the democratic groups in other countries which are aided by programs funded by the Endowment.”<sup>7</sup>

Although its founding legislation states that the NED was not intended to be “an agency or establishment of the United States Government,” the

CHART 1

## National Endowment for Democracy, Total Revenue

IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS



**SOURCE:** National Endowment for Democracy, “Financial Report,” September 30, 2022, [https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NED\\_22-FS\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NED_22-FS_Final.pdf) (accessed July 25, 2024).

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legislation requires the NED to “consult with the Department of State on any overseas program funded by the Endowment prior to the commencement of the activities of that program.”<sup>8</sup> The lack of actual independence of the NED was again emphasized in 1986, when Congress passed additional clarifying legislation that defined in great detail how the NED must be structured and organized.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding its activities, § 4414 of the original legislation states: “[F]unds may not be expended, either by the Endowment or by any of its grantees, to finance the campaigns of candidates for public office” (in reference to activities conducted outside the United States), and “no grants may be made to any institute, foundation, or organization engaged in partisan activities on behalf of the Republican or Democratic National Committee, on behalf of any candidate for public office, or on behalf of any political party in the United States.”<sup>10</sup>

Congressional funding of the NED during its early years averaged a modest \$15 million to \$18 million per year, with that number doubling by 2000. The post-9/11 War on Terror saw a surge in demand for “nation building,” and the NED’s total revenue swelled to \$136 million by the end

of 2008.<sup>11</sup> Since then, except for the last year of the Trump Administration, the NED's total revenue has continued to grow, surging from a previous high of \$180 million in fiscal year (FY) 2019, to \$321 million in FY 2022.<sup>12</sup>

## The Four Institutes and Other Grant Recipients

From its founding, the NED has had a special relationship with four ancillary organizations through which it channels up to 50 percent of its annual funding.<sup>13</sup> These institutes collectively represent business, labor, and the two major political parties, and are its core partners:

- The Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), which is affiliated with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce;
- The American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS or Solidarity Center), which is affiliated with the AFL-CIO;
- The National Democratic Institute (NDI), affiliated with the national Democratic Party; and
- The International Republican Institute for International Affairs (IRI), affiliated with the national Republican Party.<sup>14</sup>

The NED covers a significant portion of the core administration costs of each institute, as well as providing funds for their activities, but the institutes can seek funding from other sources, including private foundations, U.S. government agencies and departments, and even foreign governments. NED funds not allocated to the institutes are used for democracy promotion grants to other U.S. and foreign organizations. Grant proposals submitted to the NED are evaluated and awarded based on criteria outlined in legislation.<sup>15</sup>

## Transparency

The legislation establishing the NED states: “As a recipient of congressionally appropriated funds, NED has a special responsibility to: (i) operate openly, (ii) provide relevant information on programs and operations to the public, and (iii) ensure that funds are spent wisely, efficiently, and in accordance with all relevant regulations.”<sup>16</sup> Likewise, on its website it avers that the “NED operates with a high degree of transparency and accountability

reflecting our founders' belief that democracy promotion overseas should be conducted openly."<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the commitment to transparency has broken down in recent years. Through FY 2021 the NED provided an online database of the specific grants it makes,<sup>18</sup> and while earlier grants are still accessible, no new grants have been posted since 2021. The NED stopped producing a printable Annual Report in 2017, and since then has only a multimedia summary report on its website.<sup>19</sup>

## Governance

According to Code of Federal Regulations, Chapter 22, Part 67, on the Organization of the National Endowment for Democracy, the "NED is governed by a bipartisan board of Directors of not fewer than thirteen and not more than twenty-five members reflecting the diversity of American society."<sup>20</sup> As of late 2023 there were 28 members on the board. Board members are elected by the board and are responsible for all major policy and funding decisions.

NED operations are managed by a president selected by the Board of Directors. The Code of Federal Regulations also states that the primary statement of the NED's operating philosophy is embodied in the Statement of Principles and Objectives adopted by the Board of Directors in 1984. The statement recognizes the endowment's objectives reflect "the hopes and ideals of the American people" and are "rooted in universally recognized principles of international law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other United Nations agreements."<sup>21</sup>

## Partisan Capture

The NED's required commitment to bipartisanship is prominently featured on its website: "From its beginning, NED has remained steadfastly bipartisan. Created jointly by Republicans and Democrats, NED is governed by a board balanced between both parties and enjoys Congressional support across the political spectrum."<sup>22</sup> And, as noted previously, the NED's 1986 legislation stipulated that the "NED is governed by a bipartisan board... reflecting the diversity of American society."<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, these laudable commitments are not realized in practice.

Earlier this year a former editorial board member (from 2007 to 2021) of the NED's *Journal of Democracy* wrote that the NED became increasingly partisan after Donald Trump's election in 2016 and sought to "delegitimize

conservative politics.”<sup>24</sup> Analysis of employee political campaign contributions suggests that the NED is currently a Democrat-staffed and Democrat-run organization that funds institutes that are primarily Democrat-staffed and Democrat-run.

**Board of Directors.** The Board of Directors of the NED is required to be bipartisan and “balanced,” yet has sixteen Democrat members compared to just twelve Republicans.<sup>25</sup> Analysis of political donation records maintained by the Federal Election Commission for 2019–2022 (i.e., two election cycles) also show partisan imbalance, with \$100,599 (82 percent) of donations from board members going to Democrat candidates and causes, and just \$22,661 (18 percent) for Republican candidates and causes. The President of the NED, Damon Wilson, was the largest donor to the Democrats among the current board members (although he was still at the Atlantic Council when the contributions were made), contributing \$32,120 from 2019 through 2022 to Democrats and none to Republican campaigns.

Anne Applebaum and Rachel Kleinfeld are two of the most prominent and published board members, and both have sought to delegitimize the Republican Party and to dehumanize Republican voters. Anne Applebaum has said of Republicans that “they aren’t even a legitimate political party.”<sup>26</sup> She is married to a former Polish Minister of Defense, who is now the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, and became a naturalized Polish citizen. Continuing the theme, Rachel Kleinfeld wrote that “the embrace of violence and intimidation as a political tactic by a faction of the GOP will cause violence of all types to rise—against all Americans,”<sup>27</sup> and “I am a Democrat, and I believe that that is very important right now: because the Republican party is in thrall to this anti-democratic force.”<sup>28</sup> NED “experts” also promote this falsehood, with Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way writing that “the Republican Party, moreover, has radicalized into an extremist, antidemocratic force that imperils the U.S. constitutional order.”<sup>29</sup>

Demonstrating a tilt of its Republican members, only one donated to President Trump’s reelection campaign in 2020, while others made significant contributions to Never Trump political actions committees and candidates. Although Stephen Biegun was a Trump political appointee, his 2020 donations all went to anti-Trump candidates and causes (Team Cheney and the Great Task). Scott Carpenter’s donations went to candidate Liz Cheney and the Great Task as well.<sup>30</sup>

Several board members are ostensibly Republican, but their recent donations and/or statements suggest they currently support the Democratic Party. Jendayi Frazer was Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during the George W. Bush Administration. In 2016, Frazer stated that

regarding President Trump, “I am a Republican...but I would rather my country not go down the fascist route.”<sup>31</sup> During the period reviewed, all her donations (\$24,706) were to Democrat candidates and causes.

Victor Cha, along with over 130 other former Republican national security officials, signed a statement that asserted that President Trump was unfit to serve another term, and added, “[t]o that end, we are firmly convinced that it is in the best interest of our nation that Vice President Joe Biden be elected as the next President of the United States, and we will vote for him.”<sup>32</sup> Cha donated \$1,455 to Democrat candidates and causes during the 2020 and 2022 election cycles.

Mel Martinez is a former Republican U.S. Senator from Florida. He did not donate to any candidates in 2020, but in 2016 he said he would not vote for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton, but would have backed Vice President Joe Biden had he decided to run.<sup>33</sup>

All Americans, including NED board members, are constitutionally free to support their political candidates of choice. However, the point of having a *bipartisan* board at the NED is to ensure that this federally funded organization fairly represents the political views of the American people at large—as is required by statute. This board does not.

**Senior Staff.** The NED lists 22 people as senior staff. Of those whose political affiliation it was possible to determine through contribution analysis and social media review, 14 are Democrats (93 percent) and one is a Republican (7 percent). The single Republican donated \$750 to Republicans, while the rest of the senior staff donated \$15,919 to Democrats.

Larry Diamond is cofounder and editor of the NED’s *Journal of Democracy*. He is listed on the NED’s website as an expert rather than senior staff but is included here because of his prominence in the media, and because he was the largest donor to Democratic candidates and causes. In a 2019 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Larry Diamond implied that conservatism is incompatible with democracy, arguing that Hungary is no longer a democracy because they elected a conservative candidate (President Victor Orban), and that other countries that also elected non-leftists (Brazil, the Philippines, and Poland) were on the same path.<sup>34</sup>

In the same article he opined that “illiberal, xenophobic” parties (i.e., non-leftist parties) have been doing better in elections in “hallowed European liberal democracies” like Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, France, and Italy. He caps it off noting that just such an “illiberal populist now occupies the White House.”<sup>35</sup>

**Staff.** According to records from the Federal Election Commission, during the period 2019 through 2022 NED staff donated \$33,698 to political

TABLE 1

## Political Affiliation of National Endowment for Democracy's Board of Directors

Director	Party
Damon Wilson	Democrat
Kenneth Wollack	Democrat
David E. Skaggs	Democrat
Jessica Adelman	Democrat
Stuart Appelbaum	Democrat
Anne Applebaum	Democrat
Liliana Ayalde	Democrat
Roxanne Brown	Democrat
Joaquin Castro	Democrat
Daniel Fried	Democrat
Amaney A. Jamal	Democrat
Tim Kaine (Hon.)	Democrat
Rachel Kleinfeld	Democrat
Minxin Pei	Democrat
Marc Plattner	Democrat
Scott D. Taylor	Democrat
Jendayi Frazer	Republican*
Mel Martinez	Republican*
Victor Cha	Republican*
Dayton Ogden	Republican
Nadia Schadlow	Republican
Peter Roskam	Republican
Marlene Colucci	Republican
Stephen E. Biegun	Republican
Scott Carpenter	Republican
Kelley Currie	Republican
Elise Stefanik	Republican
Todd Young (Hon.)	Republican

\*Recent donations and/or statements suggest these directors currently support the Democratic Party.

SOURCE: Author's research.



candidates and causes. Of that, \$32,970 (98 percent) from 91 donors went to Democrat candidates and causes, while \$728 (2 percent) from two donors went to Republican candidates and causes.

Another indication of the one-sided political orientation of the NED staff occurred when Representative Elise Stefanik (R-NY), chair of the House Republican Conference and who sits on the NED's board, defended President Trump after the controversial 2020 elections. Following the incident, 60 NED staff wrote a letter to the board stating of Stefanik's defense that "nothing could be more incompatible with the democratic values which are enshrined in the Endowment and its sacred mission" and demanding she be removed.<sup>36</sup> To the credit of the NED board, she was not removed.

**Institutes.** While the NED subsidiary institutes are not the subject of this *Backgrounders*, it is interesting to note that the mono-partisan character of the NED is reflected in the political contributions of the employees of its core institutes.<sup>37</sup> From the National Democratic Institute, 100 percent of contributions went to Democrats, as expected. At the International Republican Institute, the result was counterintuitive. Although 71 percent of the total dollars donated went to Republicans, that came from just seven individuals, while 46 employees (87 percent of donors) contributed to Democrats, suggesting the IRI leadership is predominantly Republican while the rank and file is largely Democrat.

Although the Republican Party is increasingly the party of the working class, 100 percent of donations from the employees of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity went to Democratic candidates and PACs. While business used to be thought of as aligned with the Republican Party, 100 percent of donations from employees of the Center for International Private Enterprise went to Democratic candidates and PACs.

**Programs.** The NED's political partisanship is also evident in its selection of speakers and discussants at its program events. This author reviewed 21 events sponsored by the NED between January 20, 2023, and December 6, 2023. Using political contribution data and social media review, it was determined that of the 94 speakers assessed, approximately 43 were foreign citizens. Of the remaining 51 speakers, 41 contributed to or leaned politically toward the Democrats, two contributed to or leaned towards Republicans, while eight were impossible to determine.

## Suppressing Conservative Speech

The term "disinformation" has been used in recent years to describe untrue propaganda aimed at achieving a political end, but has become

notorious because critics accuse disinformation monitors of spreading disinformation themselves and suppressing or censoring speech—especially conservative speech. While the term is now in common use to describe activities in the United States, it was originally used to describe information operations carried out by foreign adversaries. The NED has strong links to what the *Washington Examiner* (and many others) has termed the “disinformation industrial complex” through its board members and senior leadership, as well as its grant-making.<sup>38</sup>

**Damon Wilson and the DFRLab.** NED President Damon Wilson was previously Executive Vice President of the Atlantic Council, where, according to his Wikipedia page, he helped develop the Digital Forensic Research Laboratory (DFRLab).<sup>39</sup> The DFRLab is one of the four founding members of the Election Integrity Partnership, which, according to Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, was “a consortium of ‘disinformation’ academics led by Stanford University’s Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO) that worked directly with the Department of Homeland Security and the Global Engagement Center, a multi-agency entity housed within the State Department, to monitor and censor Americans’ online speech in advance of the 2020 presidential election.”<sup>40</sup> The Election Integrity Partnership (originally, and perhaps more aptly, called the Election Disinformation Partnership) “provided a way for the federal government to launder its censorship activities in hopes of bypassing both the First Amendment and public scrutiny.”<sup>41</sup>

**Anne Applebaum.** NED board member Anne Applebaum is considered an expert on disinformation. She writes and speaks on the issue frequently and teaches a course on disinformation at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.<sup>42</sup> Yet Applebaum herself has frequently been accused of spreading disinformation and promoting censorship. She played a leading role in the origin of the Russia hoax that aimed to discredit President Trump before the 2016 election<sup>43</sup> and then undermine his presidency and reelection campaign for 2020;<sup>44</sup> was an active participant in discrediting accurate coronavirus information;<sup>45</sup> and was a leading player in the effort to suppress and censor information from Hunter Biden’s laptop prior to the 2020 election—an organized disinformation campaign many believe affected the outcome of the election.<sup>46</sup> Applebaum was an advisor to the Global Disinformation Index, but after they were accused of suppressing conservative media in 2023, she stated she had had no contact with them since 2018 or 2019.<sup>47</sup>

**Google AI and “Prebunking.”** Scott Carpenter, another NED board member, is the Managing Director of Jigsaw at Google. Jigsaw develops

tools to counter online hate speech and disinformation. The tools include prompts for Internet users to check the accuracy of information Google's AI has identified as misinformation, automatic redirects for users attempting to view "extremist" content, prompts for comment writers to edit comments the AI views as potentially toxic, and performs behavioral modification through prebunking to encourage users to discount information the AI deems extremist or to be disinformation.<sup>48</sup>

Prebunking is a form of psychological or attitudinal inoculation described in a study supported by Jigsaw to test psychological inoculation against "male supremacy" and "white supremacy" messages, according to a Yale University expert.<sup>49</sup> Jigsaw has also created, in collaboration with NED-grantee Thomson Reuters Foundation, a program called "Harassment Manager" that feeds Google's AI comments on news articles that human reviewers have identified as "toxic" to train the AI to identify and hide similar comments, in an effort to protect journalists from "toxic" comments about their reporting.<sup>50</sup>

According to Gabe Kaminsky, an investigative reporter at the *Washington Examiner*, the NED made grants totaling \$545,750 between 2020 and 2021 to the Global Disinformation Index (GDI), a British organization that compiles a list of "risky" online platforms that advertisers should avoid.<sup>51</sup> The list ranked left-leaning sites as low risk and right-leaning outlets high risk, essentially trying to bankrupt the outlets. According to *Reason* magazine, GDI's 10 riskiest online news outlets included *Reason*, the *New York Post*, *Real Clear Politics*, *The Daily Wire*, *The Blaze*, One America News Network, *The Federalist*, *Newsmax*, *The American Spectator*, and *The American Conservative*.<sup>52</sup>

Twelve Republican lawmakers asked Secretary of State Antony Blinken why the State Department and the NED funded a "foreign organization that polices and suppresses domestic American information" and noted:

[T]hese grants have real world implications, chilling freedom of expression and speech with impunity. For example, considering the Energy Department and FBI's new determination that the Coronavirus most likely arose from a Wuhan lab leak, this taxpayer-funded British outfit pressured advertising companies to "punish" websites that dared to report on the entirely legitimate lab leak theory.<sup>53</sup>

After Republican lawmakers raised their concerns, the NED stated that their mandate is to work internationally, and that even though the GDI's work in the U.S. was funded by a different donor, "to avoid the perception that NED is engaged in any work domestically, directly or indirectly, we will no longer provide financial support to GDI."<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusions

**NED Partisanship.** The National Endowment for Democracy was founded to be bipartisan—and continues to portray itself as bipartisan—but it is not bipartisan. Its governing board tilts heavily towards the Democratic Party, and according to Federal Election Commission data on political campaign contributions, its senior staff is more than 90 percent Democrat leaning, and its regular staff is almost 100 percent Democrat. In fact, the percentages are so skewed that they suggest a culture of employment discrimination against conservatives and Republicans. In no way does NED leadership and staff reflect “the diversity of American society.”<sup>55</sup>

The NED is also partisan in the events it conducts, the activities it supports, and the perspectives it promotes. Rather than being an open forum in which a multitude of perspectives and ideas can be presented and debated, speakers or discussants at NED events are almost exclusively Democrat leaning.<sup>56</sup> While enjoying bipartisan congressional support for its funding, the NED acts in the service of the Democratic Party, promotes politicized memes concerning conservatives as threats to democracy, and poisons conservative reputations overseas.

The NED’s programming supported the international “disinformation industrial complex,” which originated in methodologies developed by the NED and others to support “color revolutions” overseas and counter foreign propaganda. According to a report from the House Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government,<sup>57</sup> the tools developed for programs overseas were applied by “disinformation experts” (some with direct links to the NED) supported by taxpayer funding in order to censor and suppress conservative speech in the United States in advance of the 2020 and 2022 elections.

According to Kaminsky, in addition to developing disinformation “tools,” the NED made direct grants to a British group that sought to promote left-wing publishers in the United States while working to suppress conservative publishers.<sup>58</sup> The NED’s interest in the control of speech both in the U.S. and abroad suggests its priority is promoting a particular political message and ideology rather than facilitating an open and democratic environment where all people can freely express their political ideas.

**Mission Duplication.** The types of activities and organizations supported by the NED are duplicated by existing government agencies and departments, but the NED lacks the strong safeguards and accountability mechanisms required of government-run programs. If the NED does not provide actual separation and independence from U.S. foreign policy, and

if the NED duplicates (with less oversight) capacities already present in government, then appropriators, lawmakers, and citizens may rightfully ask if the institution is still needed.

Although the NED was originally conceived as a primary funder for the four institutes (CIPE, Solidarity Center, NDI, and IRI), today these institutes receive funding from a wide variety of sources. The most diversified is the National Democratic Institute, which, according to its website,<sup>59</sup> receives support from the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (its largest donors); the governments of 17 countries; the European Union and Organization of American States; eight U.N. and multinational organizations; and 14 corporations, foundations, and lobbying organizations.

The ability of the institutes to receive funding from other entities, including taxpayer funding from U.S. government departments and agencies, suggest the NED has outlived this role. The institutes, U.S. departments and agencies, and many other organizations also have greater ability and capacity than the NED to make direct grants to international and local organizations using U.S. taxpayer funds, making this NED function duplicative and superfluous.

## Recommendations

- **Congress should demand that the NED be truly bipartisan in its board, staffing, and program choices.** Actual democracy requires and facilitates a contest of ideas. If the NED is to continue to receive taxpayer support, Congress should require it to reflect the diversity of political thought in America in both its hiring and its events.
- **Require an independent audit by the Government Accountability Office to investigate violations of NED's statutory requirement to be bipartisan.** Congress should require the State Department's Inspector General to conduct an investigation and issue a report on the NED's failure to adhere to its legal obligations to be bipartisan—as well as its role in censoring U.S. citizens. If its conclusions indicate criminal acts, requests for prosecution should be forwarded to the Attorney General or relevant state Attorneys General.
- **Congress should fold the NED's appropriation into the U.S. Department of State and USAID international affairs budget.**

Because the NED duplicates existing government grant-making and diplomatic capacity, Congress should reconsider its annual appropriation. If appropriators wish to maintain current levels of “democracy” funding, these funds can be easily reprogrammed through government agencies and the NED institutes already funded for the same purposes.

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## Endnotes

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