

Their Democracy

By Bruce Gilley

A government agency seeks to delegitimize conservative politics.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) used to be one of those gloriously bipartisan institutions where Democrats and Republicans broke bread and shared ideas about how to expand democracy abroad. But like many once-neutral institutions, whether in the media, the universities, or publicly-funded foundations, the NED has become baldly partisan since the 2016 election. In doing so, it has put its mission and its integrity at risk.

Launched by President Reagan 40 years ago “to foster the infrastructure of democracy” around the world, the NED is governed by a bipartisan board. It gives grants to democracy activists overseas, holds events, publishes books and journals, and brings advocates for democracy from around the world to the U.S. on fellowships. It receives fierce criticism from both [the anti-American Left](#) and the [isolationist Right](#)—a good sign of its bipartisan nature. It is loud and proud about promoting democracy abroad despite the cavils. Its congressionally-approved budget from the Department of State for fiscal year 2022 was \$300 million.

But since the election of Donald Trump, NED has repeatedly violated its supposed neutrality on American politics and engaged in openly-partisan advocacy against Trump and Republicans. This is a remarkable intellectual failure for an organization that lectures other countries about accepting the legitimacy of the political opposition, especially one you detest.

The slide began before the 2016 election when NED President

Car Gershman broke the written rule of neutrality by [repeating](#) false claims that Russia was trying to elect Trump with his “praise of Putin’s strongman rule.” After the election, Gershman unwisely [contributed](#) to a *Washington Post* feature, written mostly by Left activists, on “How to Fix American Democracy.”



Apparently, Gershman agreed with the premise that the election of a populist Republican meant that U.S. democracy was “broken.” Stanford’s Larry Diamond, a core actor in the NED as long-time editor of its journals and books as well as head of its research arm, wrote in his 2019 book *Ill Winds* that Trump had steered America toward authoritarianism. “I never imagined that democracy here could be in danger,” he wrote in the book, which the NED promoted. “We cannot defend and renew free government around the world unless we do so at home. Stopping the desecration of democratic norms and institutions by Donald Trump (and budding autocrats elsewhere) is vital but insufficient.”

The partisan slide was also evident in the NED flagship *Journal of Democracy*, on whose editorial board I sat from 2007 to 2021. A 2017 article on “How Trump Lost and Won” called the 2016 election a choice between “a multicultural society that welcomes newcomers and embraces its growing diversity, or a more provincial place that recalls an earlier era of traditional gender roles and white Christian dominance

in economic and cultural life.” Madeleine Albright, chair at the time of the Democratic Party’s NED branch, the National Democratic Institute, penned the anti-Trump bestseller *Fascism: A Warning*, which the NDI promoted in a book event hosted by NDI president Derek Mitchell.

Not surprisingly, Trump tried to slash funding for the NED, which prompted self-congratulatory statements from the NED along the lines of “This just proves it.” Rather than prompt a course-correction, NED has become even more shrill in its opposition to the legitimacy of the Trump presidency and to Republicans more generally.

Predictably, things got worse after the 2020 election. Albright put out a statement on behalf of the NDI after the January 6 riot that went well beyond condemnation of the riot at the Capitol, revealing the animus against Republicans that had driven the previous four years. “No democracy can survive if the deep wounds and enduring legacies of systemic racism, misogyny and bigotry are allowed to fester,” the statement said. Shortly thereafter, NED staff members (up to the highest levels, I am told) tried to force the board to unseat New York Republican congresswoman Elise Stefanik, who joined the NED board in 2019. She had raised doubts about the constitutional validity of the election and had voted against certification of Joe Biden.

Although the staff insurrection was defeated, the partisan shift of the NED was not. A 2021 article in the *Journal of Democracy* on “The Rise of Political Violence in the United States” by NED board member Rachel Kleinfeld asserted “the bedrock idea uniting right-wing communities who condone violence is that white Christian men in the United States are under cultural and demographic threat and require defending—and that it is the Republican Party and Donald Trump, in particular, who will safeguard their way of life.”

The same year, an article on “The Miracle and Tragedy of the

2020 U.S. Election” warned of “a new generation of violent voter suppression” from Republican state legislatures. Just last year, an article on “Why Democracies Survive” compared Trump to Mussolini and warned darkly that “it would be risible to ignore troubling parallels between the interwar epoch and our current era.”

Republicans now view, not without evidence, NED as just another Deep State agency seeking to consolidate a permanent liberal majority by abusing administrative authority. After revelations by the *Washington Examiner*, several GOP congressmen sent [letters](#) to the Biden Administration this year criticizing NED’s support of the British-based Global Disinformation Index (GDI), which [targets](#) mainly conservative news outlets. The NED withdrew funding, [noting](#), “Our mandate is to work around the world and not in the United States.”

But it continues to do just that. While withdrawing from the GDI, it still funds the French government-led International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM), which the Biden Administration in 2021 said would be given \$30 million by the administration’s aid agency, USAID, not NED. The IFPIM is no less partisan than GDI. One management board member, Julie Posetti, is the co-author of a United Nations report of 2018, *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation*, that repeatedly assails Trump, conservative media, and the Republican party in the U.S. as the sole purveyors of disinformation.

Such bald partisanship in NED activities used to be unthinkable. NED’s 30th anniversary townhall in 2013 was joined by House and Senate leaders from both parties and was entitled “With Liberty & Justice for All: America’s Bipartisan Commitment to Democracy Abroad.” Ironically, the only truly non-partisan branch of the NED today is the Republican Party’s unit, the International Republican Institute. You will struggle to find *any* references to Trump (or Biden) by the IRI other than suggestions for their overseas democracy promotion agendas. It maintains a laser focus on overseas “democratic

infrastructure.”

There is no doubt that the Trump era represented a serious strain on American democracy. There is also no doubt that the Biden Administration, despite its promises, has worsened those strains and done nothing to repair the damage. The NED is better off staying out of this. Otherwise, it will become part of the problem, and possibly one of its casualties.

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