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Obama's Speech on the State of American Democracy: Full Text

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37-47 minutes

During a speech at the University of Illinois, the former president delivered a sharp rebuke of Donald Trump and urged Americans to vote this November.

Sep 7, 2018





John Gress / Reuters

On Friday, former President Barack Obama accepted the Paul H. Douglas Award for Ethics in Government at the University of Illinois.

Obama's remarks provided the first taste of the message he'll deliver on behalf of Democratic candidates around the country when he hits the campaign trail this fall.

Below, the full text of Obama's remarks as delivered.

Hello, Illinois! ILL! ILL! Okay, okay. Checking to see if you are awake. Please have a seat everybody.

It is good to be home. Good to see corn. Beans. I was trying to explain this to somebody as we were flying in—that's corn, that's beans. They were very impressed by my agricultural knowledge. Please give it up for Amare for that outstanding introduction. I have a bunch of good

friends here today, including somebody who I served with who is one of the finest senators in the country, and we're lucky to have him—our Senator Dick Durbin is here. I also notice, by the way, former Governor Edgar here, who I haven't seen in a long time—and somehow he hasn't aged but I have. It's great to see him again. I want to thank President Killeen and everybody at the U of I system for making it possible for me to be here today, and I'm deeply honored at the Paul Douglas Award that is being given to me. He is somebody who set the path for so much outstanding public service here in Illinois.

Now, I want to start by addressing the elephant in the room. I know people are still wondering why I didn't speak at the 2017 commencement. The student-body president sent a very thoughtful invitation, students made a spiffy video, and when I declined, I hear there was speculation that I was boycotting campus until Antonio's Pizza reopened. So I want to be clear.

I did not take sides in that late-night-food debate. The truth is, after eight years in the White House, I needed to spend time one-on-one with Michelle if I wanted to stay married—and she says hello, by the way. I also wanted to spend quality time with my daughters, who were suddenly young women on their way out the door. And I should add, by the way, now that I have a daughter in college, I can tell all of the students here, your parents suffer. They cry privately. It is brutal. So please call. Send a text. We need to hear from you, just a little something.

And truth was, I was also intent on following a wise American tradition of ex-presidents gracefully exiting the political stage and making room for new voices and new ideas. And we have our first president, George Washington, to thank for setting that example. After he led the colonies to victory as General Washington, there were no constraints on him, really. He was

practically a god to those who had followed him into battle. There was no Constitution, there were no democratic norms that guided what he should or could do. And he could have made himself all powerful. He could have made himself potentially president for life. And instead he resigned as commander in chief and moved back to his country estate. And six years later, he was elected president. But after two terms, he resigned again and rode off into the sunset. And the point Washington made, the point that is essential to American democracy, is that in a government of and by and for the people, there should be no permanent ruling class. There are only citizens who, through their elected and temporary representatives, determine our course and determine our character.

[Obama faces the ex-president's dilemma.](#)

I'm here today because this is one of those pivotal moment when every one of us, as citizens of the United States, need to determine

just who it is that we are, just what it is that we stand for. And as a fellow citizen, not as an ex-president but as a fellow citizen, I am here to deliver a simple message, and that is that you need to vote because our democracy depends on it.

Now some of you may think I'm exaggerating when I say this November's elections are more important than any I can remember in my lifetime. I know politicians say that all the time. I have been guilty of saying it a few times, particularly when I was on the ballot. But just a glance at recent headlines should tell you that this moment really is different. The stakes really are higher. The consequences of any of us sitting on the sidelines are more dire. And it's not as if we haven't had big elections before, or big choices to make in our history. The fact is, democracy has never been easy and our Founding Fathers argued about everything. We waged a Civil War. We overcame depression.

We've lurched from eras of great progressive change to periods of retrenchment.

Still, most Americans alive today, certainly the students who are here, have operated under some common assumptions about who we are and what we stand for. Out of the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution and the Great Depression, America adapted a new economy, a 20th-century economy, guiding our free market with regulations to protect health and safety and fair competition. Empowering workers with union movements, investing in science and infrastructure and educational institutions like U of I. Strengthening our system of primary and secondary education and stitching together a social safety net. And all of this led to unrivaled prosperity and the rise of a broad and deep middle class, in the sense that if you worked hard, you could climb the ladder of success.

Now not everyone was included in this prosperity. There's a lot more work to do, and so

in response to the stain of slavery and segregation and the reality of racial discrimination, the civil-rights movement not only opened new doors for African Americans, but also opened up the floodgates of opportunity for women and Americans with disabilities and LGBT Americans, others to make their own claims to full and equal citizenship. And although discrimination remained a pernicious force in our society, and continues to this day, and although there are controversies about how to best ensure genuine equality of opportunity, there has been at least rough agreement among the overwhelming majority of Americans that our country is strongest when everybody is treated fairly, when people are judged on the merits and content of their character and not the color of their skin or the way in which they worship God, or their last names.

[The hoarding of the American dream](#)

And that consensus then extended beyond our

borders, and from the wreckage of World War II we built a postwar web, architecture, system of alliances and institutions to underwrite freedom and oppose Soviet totalitarianism and help poorer countries develop.

And American leadership across the globe wasn't perfect. We made mistakes, at times we lost sight of our ideals. We had fierce arguments about Vietnam, and we had fierce arguments about Iraq. But thanks to our leadership—a bipartisan leadership—and the efforts of diplomats and Peace Corps volunteers, and most of all thanks to the constant sacrifices of our men and women in uniform, we not only reduced the prospects of war between the world's great powers, we not only won the Cold War, we helped spread a commitment to certain values and principles like the rule of law, and human rights, and democracy, and the notion of the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. And even those countries that didn't

abide by those principles were still subject to shame and still had to at least give lip service to the idea, and that provided a lever to continually improve the prospects for people around the world.

That's the story of America, a story of progress. Fitful progress, incomplete progress, but progress. And that progress wasn't achieved by just a handful of famous leaders making speeches. It was won because of countless quiet acts of heroism and dedication by citizens, by ordinary people, many of them not much older than you. It was won because rather than be bystanders to history, ordinary people fought and marched and mobilized and built and, yes, voted to make history.

Of course, there's always been another, darker aspect to America's story. Progress doesn't just move in a straight line. There's a reason why progress hasn't been easy and why throughout our history, every two steps forward seems to

sometimes produce one step back. Each time we painstakingly pull ourselves closer to our founding ideals, that all of us are created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, the ideals that say every child should have opportunity and every man and woman in this country who is willing to work hard should be able to find a job and support a family and pursue the American dream, the ideals that say we have the responsibility to care for the sick and infirm and we have a responsibility to conserve the amazing bounty, the natural resources of this country and of this planet for future generations—each time we have gotten closer to those ideals, somebody somewhere has pushed back. The status quo pushes back.

[My president was black.](#)

Sometimes the backlash comes from people who are genuinely, if wrongly, fearful of change. More often it's manufactured by the powerful and the privileged who want to keep us divided

and keep us angry and keep us cynical, because it helps them maintain the status quo, and keep their power, and keep their privilege. And you happen to be coming of age during one of those moments. It did not start with Donald Trump. He is a symptom, not the cause. He is just capitalizing on resentments that politicians have been fanning for years. A fear and anger that's rooted in our past but is also born out of the enormous upheavals that have taken place in your brief lifetimes. And by the way, it is brief—when I heard Amare was 11 when I got elected, and now he's started a company—that was yesterday!

But think about it—you have come of age in a smaller, more connected world, where demographic shifts and the winds of change have scrambled not only traditional economic arrangements but our social arrangements, and our religious commitments, and our civic institutions. Most of you don't remember a time

before 9/11, when you didn't have to take off your shoes at an airport. Most of you don't remember a time when America wasn't at war, or when money and images and information could travel instantly around the globe. Or when the climate wasn't changing faster than our efforts to address it.

This change has happened fast, faster than any time in human history, and it created a new economy that has unleashed incredible prosperity. But it's also upended people's lives in profound ways. For those with unique skills or access to technology and capital, a global market has meant unprecedented wealth. For those not so lucky—for the factory worker, for the office worker, or even middle managers, those same forces may have wiped out your job, or at least put you in no position to ask for a raise. And as wages slowed and inequality accelerated, those at the top of the economic pyramid have been able to influence government

to skew things even more in their direction: cutting taxes on the wealthiest Americans, unwinding regulations and weakening workers' protections, shrinking the safety net.

So you have come of age during a time of growing inequality, of fracturing of economic opportunity. And that growing economic divide compounded other divisions in our country—regional, racial, religious, cultural—and made it harder to build consensus on issues. It made politicians less willing to compromise, which increased gridlock, which made people even more cynical about politics.

[The birth of the new American aristocracy](#)

And then the reckless behavior of financial elites triggered a massive financial crisis, 10 years ago this week, a crisis that resulted in the worst recession in any of our lifetimes and caused years of hardship for the American people, for many of your parents, for many of your families.

Most of you weren't old enough to fully focus on what was going on at the time, but when I came into office in 2009, we were losing 800,000 jobs a month. 800,000. Millions of people were losing their homes. Many were worried we were entering into a second Great Depression.

So we worked hard to end that crisis, but also to break some of these longer-term trends, and the actions we took during that crisis returned the economy to healthy growth, and initiated the longest streak of job creation on record, and we covered another 20 million Americans with health insurance, and we cut our deficits by more than half, partly by making sure that people like me, who have been given amazing opportunities by this country, pay our fair share in taxes to help folks coming up behind them. And by the time I left office, household income was near its all-time high, and the uninsured rate hit an all-time low and wages were rising and poverty rates were falling.

I mention all this just so when you hear how great the economy is doing right now, let's just remember when this recovery started. I mean, I'm glad it's continued, but when you hear about this economic miracle that's been going on, when the job numbers come out, monthly job numbers, and suddenly Republicans are saying, 'It's a miracle!' I have to kind of remind them—actually those job numbers are the same as they were in 2015 and 2016. Anyway, I digress. So we made progress, but—and this is the truth—my administration couldn't reverse 40-year trends in only eight years, especially when the Republicans took over the House of Representatives and decided to block everything we did, even things they used to support. So we pulled the economy out of crisis, but to this day, too many people who once felt solidly middle class, still feel very real and very personal economic insecurity.

Even though we took out Bin Laden and wound

down the wars in Iraq, and our combat role in Afghanistan, and got Iran to halt its nuclear program, the world is still full of threats and disorder that comes streaming through people's televisions every single day. And these challenges get people worried and it frays our civic trust, and it makes a lot of people feel like the fix is in, and the game is rigged, and nobody's looking out for them, especially those communities outside our big urban centers.

And even though your generation is the most diverse in history, with a greater acceptance and celebration of our differences than ever before, those are the kinds of conditions that are ripe for exploitation by politicians who have no compunction and no shame about tapping into America's dark history of racial and ethnic and religious division. Appealing to tribe, appealing to fear, pitting one group against another, telling people that order and security will be restored if it weren't for those who don't look like us or don't

sound like us or don't pray like we do—that's an old playbook. It's as old as time. And in a healthy democracy, it doesn't work. Our antibodies kick in and people of goodwill across the political spectrum call out the bigots and the fearmongers, and work to compromise to get things done, and promote the better angels of our nature.

But when there's a vacuum in our democracy, when we don't vote, when we take our basic rights and freedoms for granted, when we turn away and stop paying attention and stop engaging and stop believing, and look for the newest diversion, the electronic versions of bread and circuses, then other voices fill the void. A politics of fear and resentment and trenchment takes hold, and demagogues promise simple fixes to complex problems. You know, promise to fight for the little guy even though they cater to the most wealthy and powerful. Promise to clean up corruption and

then plunder away. They start undermining norms that ensure accountability and try to change the rules to entrench their power further. And they appeal to racial nationalism that's barely veiled, if veiled at all. Sound familiar?

[The white nationalists are winning.](#)

I understand that this is not just a matter of Democrats versus Republicans or liberals versus conservatives. At various times in our history, this kind of politics has infected both parties. Southern Democrats were the bigger defenders of slavery. It took a Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, to end it. Dixiecrats filibustered anti-lynching legislation, opposed the idea of expanding civil rights. And although it was a Democratic president and a majority Democratic Congress spurred on by marchers and protesters, that got the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act over the finish lines, those historic laws also got passed because of the leadership of Republicans like Illinois's own

Everett Dirksen.

So neither party has had a monopoly on wisdom. Neither party has been exclusively responsible for us going backwards instead of forwards, but I have to say this, because sometimes we hear 'a plague on both your houses.' Over the past few decades—wasn't true when Jim Edgar was the governor here in Illinois, or Jim Thompson was governor, got a lot of good Republican friends here in Illinois—but over the past few decades, the politics of resentment and division and paranoia has unfortunately found a home in the Republican Party.

This Congress has championed the unwinding of campaign-finance laws to give billionaires outside influence over our politics; systematically attacked voting rights to make it harder for young people and minorities and the poor to vote; handed out tax cuts without regard to deficits; slashed the safety net wherever it could;

cast dozens of votes to take away health insurance from ordinary Americans; embraced wild conspiracy theories, like those surrounding Benghazi or my birth certificate; rejected science, rejected facts on things like climate change; embraced a rising absolutism, from a willingness to default on America's debt by not paying our bills to a refusal to even meet, much less consider, a qualified nominee for the Supreme Court because he happened to be nominated by a Democratic president. None of this is conservative.

I don't mean to pretend I'm channeling Abraham Lincoln now, but that's not what he had in mind, I think, when he helped form the Republican Party. It's not conservative. It sure isn't normal. It's radical. It's a vision that says the protection of our power and those who back us is all that matters even when it hurts the country. It's a vision that says the few who can afford high-priced lobbyists and unlimited campaign

contributions set the agenda, and over the past two years, this vision is now nearing its logical conclusion, so that with Republicans in control of Congress and the White House, without any checks or balances whatsoever, they have provided another \$1.5 trillion in tax cuts to people like me—who I promise don't need it—and don't even pretend to pay for them.

This is supposed to be the party of fiscal conservatism. Suddenly, deficits don't matter, even though just two years ago, when the deficit was lower, they said, 'I couldn't help working families or seniors because it was, the deficit was, in existential crisis.' What changed? What changed?

They're subsidizing corporate polluters with taxpayer dollars, allowing dishonest lenders to take advantage of veterans and students and consumers again. They've made it so that the only nation on Earth to pull out of the global climate agreement—it's not North Korea, it's not

Syria, it's not Russia or Saudi Arabia—it's us. The only country! There are a lot of countries in the world. We're the only ones. They are undermining our alliances, cozying up to Russia. What happened to the Republican Party? Its central organizing principle in foreign policy was the fight against communism, and now they are cozying up to the former head of the KGB, actively blocking legislation that would defend our elections from Russian attack. What happened? Their sabotage of the Affordable Care Act has already cost more than 3 million Americans their health insurance. And if they are still in power next fall, you better believe they are coming at it again—they've said so.

In a healthy democracy, there are some checks and balances on this kind of behavior, this kind of inconsistency, but right now, there's nothing. Republicans who know better in Congress—and they're there, they are quoted saying, 'We know this is kind of crazy'—are still bending over

backwards to shield this behavior from scrutiny or accountability or consequence, seem utterly unwilling to find the backbone to safeguard the institutions that make our democracy work.

[Ben Sasse's lonely stand against Trump](#)

And by the way, the claim that everything will turn out okay because there are people inside the White House who secretly aren't following the president's orders—that is not a check. I'm being serious here. That's not how our democracy is supposed to work. These people aren't elected. They are not accountable. They are not doing us a service by actively promoting 90 percent of the crazy stuff that is coming out of this White House and then saying, 'Don't worry, we're preventing the other 10 percent.' That's not how things are supposed to work! This is not normal. These are extraordinary times, and they are dangerous times.

But here's the good news: In two months, we

have the chance—not the certainty, but the chance—to restore some semblance of sanity to our politics. Because there is actually only one real check on bad policy and abuses of power, and that's you. You and your vote.

Look, Americans will always have disagreements on policy. This is a big country, this is a raucous country, people have different points of view. I happen to be a Democrat. I support Democratic candidates. I believe our policies are better and that we have a bigger, bolder vision of opportunity and equality and justice and inclusive democracy.

We know there are a lot of jobs young people aren't getting a chance to occupy, or aren't getting paid enough, or aren't getting benefits like insurance. It's harder for young people to save for a rainy day, let alone retirement. So Democrats aren't just running on good old ideas like a higher minimum wage, but they're running on new ideas like Medicare for all, giving

workers seats on corporate boards, reversing the most egregious tax cuts to make sure college students graduate debt free. We know that people are tired of toxic corruption and that democracy depends on transparency and accountability, so Democrats aren't just running on good old ideas like requiring presidential candidates to release their tax returns and barring lobbyists from making campaign contributions, but on good new ideas like barring lobbyists from getting paid by foreign governments. We know that climate change isn't just coming, it is here. So Democrats aren't just running on good old ideas like increasing gas mileage in our cars, which I did and which Republicans are trying to reverse, but on good new ideas like putting a price on carbon pollution. We know that in a smaller more connected world, we can't just put technology back in a box, we can't just put walls up all around America. Walls don't keep out threats

like terrorism or disease. And that's why we propose leading our alliances and helping other countries develop and pushing back against tyrants. And Democrats talk about reforming our immigration system so, yes, it is orderly, fair, and it is legal, but it continues to welcome strivers and dreamers from all around the world. That's why I'm a Democrat. That's a set of ideas that I believe in.

But I am here to tell you that even if you don't agree with me or Democrats on policy, even if you believe in more libertarian economic theories, even if you are an evangelical and our position on certain social issues is a bridge too far, even if you think my assessment of immigration is mistaken and that Democrats aren't serious enough about immigration enforcement, I'm here to tell you that you should still be concerned with our current course and should still want to see a restoration of honesty and decency and lawfulness in our government.

It should not be Democratic or Republican, it should not be a partisan issue, to say that we do not pressure the Attorney General or the FBI to use the criminal-justice system as a cudgel to punish our political opponents, or to explicitly call on the Attorney General to protect members of our own party from prosecution because an election happens to be coming up. I'm not making that up, that's not hypothetical. It shouldn't be Democratic or Republican to say that we don't threaten the freedom of the press, because they say things or publish stories we don't like. I complained plenty about Fox News, but you never heard me threaten to shut them down, or call them enemies of the people. It shouldn't be Democratic or Republican to say we don't target certain groups of people based on what they look like or how they pray. We are Americans. We are supposed to stand up to bullies, not follow them. We are supposed to stand up to discrimination. And we're sure as

heck supposed to stand up clearly and unequivocally to Nazi sympathizers. How hard can that be, saying that Nazis are bad?

I'll be honest, sometimes I get into arguments with progressive friends about what the current political movement requires. There are well-meaning folks, passionate about social justice, who think that things have gotten so bad and the lines so starkly drawn that we have to fight fire with fire. We have to do the same things to the Republicans as they do to us, adopt their tactics, say whatever works, make up stuff about the other side. I don't agree with that. It's not because I'm soft. It's not because I'm interested in promoting an empty bipartisanship. I don't agree with it, because eroding our civic institutions, and our civic trusts, and making people angrier, and yelling at each other, and making people cynical about government, that always works better for those who don't believe in the power of collective action. You don't need

an effective government, or a robust press, or reasoned debate to work when all you're concerned about is maintaining power. In fact, the more cynical people are about government, the angrier and more dispirited they are about the prospects for change, the more likely the powerful are able to maintain their power.

[How the left lost its mind](#)

But we believe that in order to move this country forward, to actually solve problems and make people's lives better, we need a well-functioning government. We need our civic institutions to work. We need cooperation among people of different political persuasions. And to make that work, we have to restore our faith in democracy. You have to bring people together, not tear them apart. We need majorities in Congress and state legislatures who are serious about governing and want to bring about real change and improvements in people's lives. And we won't win people over by calling them names or

dismissing entire chunks of the country as racist or sexist or homophobic.

When I say bring people together, I mean all of our people. This whole notion that has sprung up recently about Democrats need to choose between trying to appeal to white working-class voters or voters of color and women and LGBT Americans, that's nonsense. I don't buy that. I got votes from every demographic. We won because we reached out to everybody and competing everywhere and by fighting for every vote, and that's what we've got to do in this election and every election after that. And we can't do that if we immediately disregard what others have to say from the start, because they are not like us, because they are white or they're black or a man or a woman, or they're gay or they're straight. If we think that somehow there is no way they can understand how I'm feeling, and therefore don't have any standing to speak on certain matters, because we're only defined

by certain characteristics. That doesn't work if you want a healthy democracy. We can't do that if we traffic in absolutes when it comes to policy.

[It was cultural anxiety that drove white working-class voters to Trump.](#)

To make democracy work, we have to be able to get inside the reality of people who are different, have different experiences, come from different backgrounds. We have to engage them even when it is frustrating. We have to listen to them even when we don't like what they have to say. We have to hope we can change their minds and we have to remain open to them changing ours.

And that doesn't mean, by the way, abandoning our principles, or caving to bad policy in the interests of maintaining some phony version of civility—that seems to be, by the way, the definition of civility offered by too many congressional Republicans right now. We will be

polite as long as we get 100 percent of what we want and you don't call us on the various ways we are sticking it to people. And we will issue statements of disappointment when the president does something outrageous but won't do anything about it. That's not civility. That's abdicating your responsibilities. But again, I digress.

Making democracy work means holding on to our principles, having clarity about our principles, and then having the confidence to get in the arena and have a serious debate. And it also means appreciating that progress does not happen all at once, but when you put your shoulder to the wheel, if you're willing to fight for it, things do get better. And let me tell you something, particularly young people here, better is good. I used to have to tell my young staff this all the time in the White House, better is good. That's the history of progress in this country—not perfect, better. The Civil Rights Act

didn't end racism, but it made things better.

Social Security didn't eliminate all poverty for seniors, but it made things better for millions of people.

Do not let people tell you the fight's not worth it, because you won't get everything that you want. The idea that, well, there's racism in America, so I'm not going to bother voting, no point—that makes no sense. You can make it better.

Better's always worth fighting for. That's how our Founders expected the system of self-government to work: that through the testing of ideas and the application of reason and evidence and proof, we could sort through our differences. And nobody would get exactly what they wanted, but it would be possible to find a basis for common ground.

And that common ground exists. Maybe it's not fashionable to say that right now. It's hard to see it with all the nonsense in Washington and hard to hear it with all the noise, but common ground

exists. I have seen it. I have lived it. I know there are white people who care deeply about black people being treated unfairly. I have talked to them, and loved them. And I know there are black people who care deeply about the struggles of white rural America. I'm one of them, and I have a track record to prove it. I know there are evangelicals who are deeply committed to doing something about climate change. I have seen them do the work. I know there are conservatives who think there's nothing compassionate about separating immigrant children from their mothers. I know there are Republicans who believe that government should only perform a few minimal functions, but that one of those functions should be making sure that nearly 3,000 Americans don't die in a hurricane and its aftermath.

Common ground is out there. I see it every day. In just how people interact and people treat each other. You see it on the ball field. You see it at

work. You see it in places of worship. But to say that common ground exists doesn't mean it will inevitably win out. History shows the power of fear. And the closer that we get to Election Day, the more those invested in the politics of fear and division will work, will do anything to hang on to their recent gains.

Fortunately, I am hopeful, because out of this political darkness I am seeing a great awakening of citizenship all across the country. I cannot tell you how encouraged I've been by watching so many people getting involved for the first time, or the first time in a long time. They are marching and organizing and registering people to vote and they're running for office themselves.

Look at this crop of Democratic candidates running for Congress and running for governor and running for state legislature, running for district attorney, running for school board. It is a movement of citizens who happen to be younger, more diverse and female than ever

before—and that's really useful. We need more women in charge. But we've got first-time candidates, we've got veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, record numbers of women, Americans who previously maybe didn't have an interest in politics as a career but laced up their shoes and rolled up their sleeves and grabbed a clipboard because they, too, believe this time's different. This moment's too important to sit out. And if you listen to what these candidates are talking about in individual races across the country, you'll find they're not just running against something, they're running for something. They're running to expand opportunity. They're running to restore the honor and compassion that should be the essence of public service. And speaking as a Democrat, that's when the Democratic Party has always made the biggest difference in the lives of the American people, when we led with conviction, and principle, and bold new ideas.

The antidote to a government controlled by a powerful few, a government that divides, is a government by the organized, energized, inclusive many. That's what this moment's about. That has to be the answer. You cannot sit back and wait for a savior. You cannot doubt, because you don't feel sufficiently inspired by this or that particular candidate. This is not a rock concert. This is not Coachella. We don't need a messiah. All we need are decent, honest, hardworking people who are accountable and who have America's best interests at heart. And they'll step up, and they'll join our government, and they'll make things better if they have support.

One election will not fix everything that needs to be fixed, but it will be a start. And you have to start it. What's going to fix our democracy is you. People ask me, 'What are you going to do for the election?' No, the question is, 'What are *you* going to do?' You're the antidote. Your participation and your spirit and your

determination. Not just in this election, but in every subsequent election, and in the days between elections. Because in the end, the threat to our democracy doesn't just come from Donald Trump, or the current batch of Republicans in Congress, or the Koch brothers and their lobbyists, or too much compromise from Democrats, or Russian hacking. The biggest threat to our democracy is indifference. The biggest threat to our democracy is cynicism. Cynicism has led too many people to turn away from politics and stay home on Election Day.

To all the young people who are here today, there are now more eligible voters in your generation than in any other, which means your generation now has more power than anybody to change things. If you want it, you can make sure America gets out of its current funk. If you actually care about it, you have the power to make sure we seize a brighter future. But to exercise that clout, to exercise that power, you

have to show up. In the last midterm elections, in 2014, fewer than one in five young people voted. One in five. Not two in five, or three—one in five. Is it any wonder this Congress doesn't reflect your values and your priorities? Are you surprised by that? This whole project of self-government only works if everybody's doing their part. Don't tell me your vote doesn't matter. I've won states in the presidential election because of five, 10, 20 votes per precinct. And if you thought elections don't matter, I hope these last two years have corrected that impression. So if you don't like what's going on right now—and you shouldn't—do not complain. Don't hashtag. Don't get anxious. Don't retreat. Don't binge on whatever it is you're binging on. Don't lose yourself in ironic detachment. Don't put your head in the sand. Don't boo. Vote. Vote!

If you are really concerned about how the criminal-justice system treats African Americans, the best way to protest is to vote, not just for

senators and representatives, but for mayors and sheriffs and state legislators. Do what they just did in Philadelphia and Boston, and elect state's attorneys and district attorneys who are looking at issues in a new light, who realize that the vast majority of law enforcement do the right thing in a really hard job, and we just need to make sure all of them do.

If you're tired of politicians who offer nothing but thoughts and prayers after a mass shooting, you've got to do what the Parkland kids are doing. Some of them aren't even eligible to vote yet. They're out there working to change minds and registering people. And they're not giving up until we have a Congress that sees your lives as more important than a campaign check from the NRA. You've got to vote.

If you support the #MeToo movement, you're outraged by stories of sexual harassment and assault, inspired by the women who've shared them, you've got to do more than retweet a

hashtag. You've got to vote.

Part of the reason women are more vulnerable in the workplace is because not enough women are bosses in the workplace, which is why we need to strengthen and enforce laws that protect a woman in the workplace, not just from harassment, but from discrimination in hiring and promotions, and not getting paid the same amount for doing the same work. That requires laws, laws get passed by legislators. You've got to vote!

When you vote, you've got the power to make it easier to afford college, and harder to shoot up a school. When you vote, you've got the power to make sure a family keeps its health insurance, you could save somebody's life. When you vote, you've got the power to make sure white nationalists don't feel emboldened to march with their hoods off, or their hoods on, in Charlottesville in the middle of the day. Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes of your time—is

democracy worth that?

We have been through much darker times than these, and somehow each generation of Americans carried us through to the other side. Not by sitting around and waiting for something to happen, not by leaving it to others to do something, but by leading that movement for change themselves. And if you do that, if you get involved, and you get engaged, and you knock on some doors, and you talk with your friends, and you argue with your family members, and you change some minds, and you vote, something powerful happens. Change happens. Hope happens. Not perfection. Not every bit of cruelty and sadness and poverty and disease suddenly is stricken from the Earth.

There will still be problems. But with each new candidate that surprises you with a victory that you supported, a spark of hope happens. With each new law that helps a kid read, or helps a homeless family find shelter, or helps a veteran

get the support he or she has earned, each time that happens, hope happens. With each new step we take in the direction of fairness and justice and equality and opportunity, hope spreads. And that can be the legacy of your generation.

You can be the generation that, at a critical moment, stood up and reminded us just how precious this experiment in democracy really is, just how powerful it can be when we fight for it, when we believe in it. I believe in you. I believe you will help lead us in the right direction, and I will be right there with you every step of the way.

Thank you, Illinois. God bless. God bless this country we love. Thank you.

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