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POLITICS | ESSAY

Why Trump's 'One Big Beautiful Bill' Is Bad for Democracy

Research shows that bundling unrelated policy proposals into a single law makes it easy to thwart what most voters—and lawmakers—actually want.

By *Matthew I. Jones and Nicholas A Christakis*

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ILLUSTRATION: MICHELLE ROHN

President-elect [Donald Trump](#) is proposing that lawmakers enact many parts of his agenda as one sweeping package that would include a hodgepodge of immigration, energy, and tax legislation. This effort, prompted by the incoming administration's recognition of its razor-thin margin in Congress, is complex, risky, and ambitious.

It may also be anti-democratic. In our research using mathematical modeling, we found that when unrelated issues are “bundled” into a single bill, those writing the bill have the ability to strong-arm members to Congress into

agreeing to policies that they would never vote for individually. Combining major policy decisions in such disparate areas into “one big beautiful bill” could allow Trump to make unpopular policy into the law of the land, even over the opposition of the majority of American voters and legislators.

Consider the way bundling works in transactions like buying a car. If a customer wants leather seats, they are often forced to buy an upgrade package that includes other things they don't desire, like fancy hubcaps or a sunroof. Customers might expect these amenities to come at a discount because they are sold in bundles, but in fact companies use these bundles to maximize profit at the expense of the buyer. Similarly, football fans often must buy massive cable packages, paying for dozens of unwanted channels to access the few that actually broadcast the games. Nobody likes this.

The same dynamics could also appear in Trump's proposal. Now that he has secured re-election, he needs to convince Congress to agree to his policies, many of which are unpopular. Trump's support for [Elon Musk](#)'s call to expand the H1B visa has exposed divisions between Republicans on immigration. Many clean energy initiatives in President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), passed in 2022, enjoy broad bipartisan support and send money to Republican districts, complicating Trump's promises to repeal the act. And while many Republicans support renewing the tax cuts passed in Trump's first term, conservative deficit hawks have already voiced opposition to the resulting unbalanced budgets.



President Trump signs the Taxpayer First Act in the Oval Office, July 2019. PHOTO: ZACH GIBSON/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Bundling all these issues into a single bill could force representatives on both sides of the aisle to vote against their real preferences. For instance, an anti-immigration hard-liner, like Republican Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, could end up voting “yes” on a bill that increases H1B visas because it also includes tax cuts and clean-energy subsidies.

Numerous “voting paradoxes” have been identified by political scientists to explore the distinction between bundled and issue-by-issue voting and to explain how bundles can be frankly anti-democratic. These paradoxes have sometimes been dismissed as being an unfortunate but necessary aspect of political dealmaking, in which legislators attach their own self-interested amendments to a “Christmas tree” bill in exchange for their vote.

But immigration, energy, and tax policy are already massive topics with many intertwined issues on which legislators can haggle. Merging the three into a single bundle needlessly increases the risk of passing legislation that is unsupported by a majority of voters.

Our recent research confirms that bundling can result in alarming levels of manipulation and anti-democratic outcomes. We looked at 2020 survey data on U.S. voter preferences about 11 issues: limits on foreign imports; changes in immigration levels; preferential hiring for Black Americans; levels of government regulation; government efforts to reduce income inequality; higher taxes on millionaires; regulations on greenhouse gases; bans on assault-style weapons; free trade agreements; universal basic incomes of \$12,000 a year; and government spending on healthcare.

We then looked at every possible way a congressional committee could assemble these 11 issues into different bundles. We found that it was possible for an anti-democratic agenda-setter to subvert the will of the majority on most of the issues. The key to creating these undemocratic bundles is understanding voters' and legislators' preferences. A voter who cares very deeply about a single key issue (say, tax cuts) could be convinced to vote against their interests on multiple other issues that are not as important to them (like immigration and energy policy, for example).

By overlapping and interweaving different voters' interests, a bundler can manipulate a large group into voting against their own preferences on almost all

the issues. In the most extreme case that we found, a committee might agree on proposals in 10 of the 11 policy areas, but if the proposals were bundled into three bills in the right way, the committee would end up voting against all of them.

If this sort of political manipulation sounds eerily like gerrymandering, that is because it is. Around the country, elected Democrats and Republicans have tightened their grip on power by slicing and dicing their constituencies, creating bizarre, misshapen districts designed to guarantee an electoral outcome, not to better represent the people. Creating bundles of unpopular policies is simply gerrymandering ideas instead of districts. Even the mathematical tools and concepts used to study redistricting can be used to study the fairness of a legislative bundle.

In a democracy, process matters. Addressing separate issues in separate bills would lead to legislation that better reflects the views of a majority of lawmakers and voters. There would still be plenty of policy details for lawmakers to discuss, debate, and make deals over, without having to wrangle three difficult issues simultaneously. But separating bills by issue would reduce the amount of unpopular policies that become law, ensuring a leaner, more sensible government. This should be a common goal of the left and the right.

Matthew I. Jones is a visiting assistant professor of Mathematics at College of the Holy Cross. Nicholas A. Christakis is the Sterling Professor of Social and Natural Science at Yale University.

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