

Democracy:

Ensuring Free and Fair Elections

March 2026



Top Line

- 1. Free and fair elections are vital to our democracy, and are highly valued by Americans**
- 2. However, our election system in the US is not functioning well – in the US or in Texas.**
- 3. Several factors are contributing to the weakening of our elections, including misinformation, unnecessary barriers to voting, foreign interference in elections, the influence of money in politics, and gerrymandering.**
- 4. Recent Republican actions at the Federal level are further threatening democracy.**
- 5. The Texas Republican Platform calls for making voting in Texas even less fair and less free.**
- 6. Several policies can help to restore and protect free and fair elections, including:**
 - At the Federal level, pass legislation to protect voting, including the John Lewis Voting Rights Act and the Freedom to Vote Act.**
 - Reduce the corrosive effect of money on our elections**
 - In Texas, make voter registration easier, expand early voting, and protect mail-in voting**
 - Establish an independent redistricting commission in Texas to protect against the distortions caused by gerrymandering**

The first step to ensuring free and fair elections, however, is to elect legislators who are committed to strengthening and protecting our democracy.

Backup

1. Free and fair elections are vital to our democracy, and are highly valued by Americans

The US is a "representative democracy", in which the people elect the representatives who make laws and decisions that affect our lives. (1)

- a. It probably seems self-evident that free and fair elections are important to our democracy, and it's not surprising that the vast majority of Americans feel that way.
 - A national poll conducted by Grinnell College found that Americans overwhelmingly believe certain principles are a foundation of American life, and among these one of the most highly rated is "free and fair elections conducted without fraud". **92% of respondents rated this as Very Important. (2)**
 - An AP/NORC survey in March 2024 found that 76% of Americans believe that "a democratically elected government" is extremely or very important to the US identity. Democrats support this even more strongly - 89%, vs. 73% of Republicans. (3)
- b. Free and fair elections are vital to the effective working of our government and society. They allow citizens to express their opinions and enable a peaceful transfer of power.
 - **Societies with functioning democracies are also better off.** On average they have better economic opportunities, better education and infrastructure. (4)
 - For example, compared with democracies, autocracies "have lower estimated life expectancy, less effective health service coverage, and higher levels of out-of-pocket health spending. (4)
 - Democracies improve children's access to education and years of schooling. And democracies do better at protecting fundamental human rights and a broad range of freedoms not traditionally enjoyed in autocracies. (4)

2. However, our election system in the US is not functioning well, in the US and in Texas.

- a. The same surveys cited above show that Americans are deeply concerned about how democracy is working in the US today. The Grinnell College survey found that

only 43% of Americans believe our democracy can be described as free and fair. The AP/NORC poll found that only 31% of respondents rate our democracy as well-functioning. (2, 3)

- b. These concerns by Americans about our democracy are well founded. Two organizations, Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit, rate the democracies of countries around the world. In both ratings, the US scores far below most other large, advanced countries.
 - On the Freedom House Democracy score for 2024, the US received an 84, significantly below most other large, advanced countries (which averaged 92).

Freedom House Democracy Scores

Sweden	99
Canada	97
Netherlands	97
Belgium	96
Japan	96
Switzerland	96
Australia	95
Czechia	95
Germany	95
Austria	93
United Kingdom	92
Spain	90
France	89
Italy	89
United States	84
Korea (Republic of)	81
Israel	73

Same as Samoa and Mongolia

Source: Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/scores>

- **Among all countries, the US ranks 53rd**, equal to Samoa and Mongolia. It is unlikely that any American would find that acceptable. (5)
- One area in which we are scored lower than most other advanced countries is in "Free and Fair elections". Specific concerns are the widespread use of gerrymandering, and laws that make it harder for people to vote. (5)
- The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political

participation, political culture, and civil liberties. On a 1 to 10 scale, the US receives a 7.85 and is classified as a "Flawed Democracy". (Most large, advanced countries are classified as "Full Democracies", but not the United States). (6)

In both assessments, the US ranks far below most other large, advanced countries. As the nation that pioneered democracy in the modern world, we should not accept a second-class democracy today.

c. As bad as the US is when it comes to Free and Fair elections, Texas is even worse.

- Northern Illinois University ranks states based on ease of voting. In their most recent ranking, for 2022, **Texas ranks 46th.** (7)
- Some of the factors that make it harder to vote in Texas than most other states include:
 - **Strict voter registration rules:** Texas does not offer online voter registration, requiring potential voters to submit paper applications either in person or by mail, making the process less convenient than in many other states. The registration deadline is 30 days before Election Day, which is earlier than in other states, some of which allow same-day registration. (8)
 - **Limited mail-in voting:** Only voters who are 65 or older, have a disability, are in jail but otherwise eligible, or will be out of their county during the election can vote by mail. Most Texans cannot use mail-in ballots, unlike in many other states that offer no-excuse absentee voting. (9)
 - **Polling place closures and long lines:** Texas has closed more than 700 polling locations since 2013, disproportionately affecting Black and Hispanic communities and leading to long wait times at the polls. In some areas, the number of polling stations has been reduced by more than 50%. (9) As we saw in the Primary election on March 3, 2026, Republican actions caused confusion about where people could vote, creating the risk that some peoples' votes were not counted.
 - **Restrictive voter ID laws:** Texas has some of the nation's toughest photo ID requirements, which can be a barrier for people who do not have the required identification. Analysis by the Brennan Center showed that these ID laws reduced voting in subsequent elections by people who were affected. The increased cost and effort required especially affected lower income Texans and Texans of color. (9)

It is not acceptable for Texas to be among the worst states in a country that is behind other countries. We are better than this.

3. Several factors are contributing to the weakening of our elections

There are many reasons why our democracy is underperforming and is at risk. Fortunately, most of them can be fixed with effective leadership. Here are some of the biggest reasons:

- a. **Misinformation** - spread through social media, false information makes it very difficult to evaluate candidates fairly. Most Americans—about 72% in June 2024—are very or somewhat concerned about false or misleading election claims and are concerned that misinformation can distort election results. (10)

- b. **One form of misinformation is the frequent claim that our elections are subject to significant fraud.** This undermines confidence in elections. Academic studies have found, unsurprisingly, that false claims of voter fraud in the 2020 election by President Trump and his supporters have further reduced confidence in our election system. (11)
 - Politicians often make claims of voter fraud when they don't like the results of an election, but extensive research reveals that fraud is very rare, voter impersonation is virtually nonexistent, and many instances of alleged fraud are, in fact, mistakes by voters or administrators. (12)
 - Brookings points out that the conservative Heritage Foundation has been monitoring election fraud for over a decade. They find that there have been 1,465 proven cases of election fraud, during a time when hundreds of millions of votes have been cast.
 - For instance, in Texas, Heritage found 103 cases of confirmed election fraud. However, those 103 ranged from 2005 to 2022 during which time over 107 million ballots were cast. **That is less than one case of fraud for every one million votes!**
 - Current law requires people to sign a citizenship oath when they register to vote, under penalty of perjury. (13)

- c. **Barriers to Voting.** The Brennan Center for Justice reports "Over the last 20 years, states have erected barriers to the ballot box by imposing strict voter ID laws, cutting early voting times, restricting registration, and purging voter rolls too aggressively. These efforts received a boost when the Supreme Court weakened the Voting Rights Act in 2013, and they've surged since the 2020 election. **Such antidemocratic measures have kept significant numbers of**

eligible voters from the polls, especially among racial minorities, poor people, and young and old voters." (14)

- d. **Foreign Interference** - The Atlantic Council outlines numerous ways foreign governments try to influence our elections. These efforts have increased since 2016. Countries involved include Russia, China, Iran and others. Tactics include:
- Russia's effort to infiltrate and influence far-right American media,
 - Creating fake social media accounts to post and spread false information, which have spread "tens of thousands of false stories and staged videos intended to undermine election integrity"
 - Even trying to shut down individual polling places with fake bomb threats.

The objectives are to misinform the voting public and decrease faith in our democracy. They also strive to elect politicians that they believe will be beneficial to them. (15)

- e. **The influence of money in politics.** According to analysis by the Brennan Center, the Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United ruling reshaped political campaigns in profound ways, giving corporations and billionaire-funded super PACs a central role in U.S. elections and making untraceable dark money a major force in politics. (16)
- f. **Gerrymandering** - Gerrymandering involves drawing district boundaries with the intention of influencing who gets elected. After the 2020 census, Republicans in the Texas Legislature redrew boundaries for state and federal offices to maximize Republican benefit.
- Gerrymandering can best be understood through the lens of two basic techniques: **cracking and packing**. As the Brennan Center explains, "Cracking splits groups of people with similar characteristics, such as voters of the same party affiliation, across multiple districts. With their voting strength divided, these groups struggle to elect their preferred candidates in any of the districts. Packing is the opposite of cracking: map drawers cram certain groups of voters into as few districts as possible. In these few districts, the "packed" groups are likely to elect their preferred candidates, but the groups' voting strength is weakened everywhere else." (17)
 - The League of Women Voters points out that gerrymandering "distorts and undermines representative democracy. It allows officials to choose their

voters rather than voters choosing who represents them. Especially when done for purposes of racial discrimination and/or to ensure the dominance of one political party, gerrymandering runs counter to equal voting rights for all." (18)

4. Republican actions at the Federal level are further threatening democracy.

President Trump and Congressional Republicans are aggressively attacking our democracy. Because repeated polling confirms that they and their policies are deeply unpopular, they know that they will not win fair elections. So, they are doing everything they can to tilt the odds in their favor, destroying our democracy if necessary.

- a. President Trump has repeatedly spread false claims that U.S. elections are “rigged,” undermining public faith in electoral legitimacy. Despite multiple lawsuits and recounts, no significant issues have been found in the 2020 election in which Trump was defeated by Joe Biden. (19)
- b. A 2026 Trump executive order on elections seeks to centralize power over election administration in the executive branch, which conflicts with the Constitution’s allocation of authority to states and Congress; legal experts warn this will disenfranchise voters and erode election integrity. (20)
- c. Reducing the ability of the Post Office to deliver mail-in ballots. In the run-up to the 2020 election, Trump admitted that he “opposed additional funding for the United States Postal Service (USPS) in order to make it more difficult to deliver mail-in ballots.” (40) This is just another example of how Trump and the Republicans blatantly try to discourage people from voting.
- d. **The “SAVE Act”, being pushed by Republican members of Congress, will disenfranchise many voters** by requiring citizenship documentation for registration that many people don’t have, and by severely limiting mail-in voting.
 - The SAVE act requires that people **provide proof of citizenship to register or to update their registration because of a move or a name change.** In general, people will be required to travel to a voter registration office to present their proof of citizenship. (21)
 - The US Committee on House Administration, a bi-partisan committee within the US House, points out: “The SAVE Act’s burdens are extreme—most

Americans would no longer be able to register to vote using their driver’s license or other state-provided identification alone.” (21)

- According to the Trump White House website, the SAVE act stipulates “No Mail-in Ballots (Except for Illness, Disability, Military or Travel)”. It also bans “late arrivals” – e.g. mail-in ballots sent in time but received after Election Day. This will give the administration a huge opportunity to disqualify valid votes.
- It is important to note that **the SAVE Act does not address a real problem** – Voter fraud, such as non-citizen voting, and voter fraud due to mail-in voting, is almost non-existent. (23) The clear intent of the SAVE Act is to disenfranchise voters.
- The Brennan Center have completed an extensive analysis of various versions of the SAVE Act, and concludes, **“These bills are part of a broader federal agenda to sow distrust in our elections, undermine election administration, and discourage Americans from making their voices heard. The SAVE Act, in any form, would block millions of American citizens from voting.”** (24)

The League of Women Voters is very clear about what the Republicans are up to:

“Let’s be clear: the *SAVE America Act*, alongside the *SAVE Act*, *Make Elections Great Again Act*, and similar proposals, is part of a coordinated effort to make voting harder for eligible Americans. **These bills are not about election security. They are about restricting access to the ballot and deciding who gets to participate in our democracy.**” (32)

Trump and the Republicans are actively interfering in the 2026 elections. The Center for Policy Progress will monitor this as the election cycle progresses. The Brennan Center (<https://www.brennancenter.org/>) is also a good source for information on how the Republicans are undermining our democracy.

5. **The Texas Republican Platform calls for making voting in Texas even less fair and less free, and Texas Governor Greg Abbott has taken actions to reduce the integrity of our elections.**

- a. The most recent Texas Republican platform (2024) makes it clear - Republicans intend to continue to make it harder to vote, and to prevent more people from voting.
- For example, the platform calls for reducing early voting to just 3 days, making it harder for working people to find time to vote.
 - They want to further limit mail-in voting and make it harder for people to register to vote.
 - They also call for repealing the Voting Rights Act, one of the signature achievements of the Civil Rights era. (25)
- b. Voter Purges – In 2024 Governor Abbott announced that over 1.1 million people were purged from the voter rolls. Election observers point out that many of these may be due to minor issues such as an out-of-date address, which should not disqualify someone from voting. (41)
- c. Governor Abbott’s push to redistrict Texas in the middle of the decade is a clear effort to distort elections to benefit Republicans.
- In August 2025, Texas Republicans developed new US House district maps designed to increase the number of Republican leaning districts by 5. Governor Abbott signed these new districts into law. (26)
 - The way this redistricting works is that heavily Republican areas are pulled out of very red districts and moved into districts that previously leaned Democratic, changing their mix to favor Republicans.
 - **Mid-decade redistricting is extremely rare.** US House districts are redrawn after each census, which occurs every 10 years. Texas and other states redrew their districts following the 2020 census, to reflect changes in population. But redoing the districts in the middle of a decade is extremely rare. Pew Research points out that in the 50 years between 1970 and 2020 only two states voluntarily redrew their congressional maps between censuses for partisan advantage - Texas in 2003 and Georgia in 2005. (27) Both of these were done by Republicans.
 - In November 2025 a district court in Texas blocked the new district maps. The majority opinion of the 3-judge court stated that “Substantial evidence shows that Texas racially gerrymandered the 2025 Map.” (28)
 - However, in December 2025 the conservatives on the Supreme Court allowed the maps. The Supreme Court did not rule on the merits of the case, they only

put a hold on the district court’s ruling, which allows Texas to use the new maps for the 2026 elections. (28)

- **Republicans have been open about the fact that this is being done for political reasons.** In July, President Donald Trump ordered Gov. Abbott to redistrict his state in the middle of the decade in order to carve out an additional five Republican-leaning congressional districts, which would bolster the party’s odds of keeping control of the U.S. House of Representatives following the 2026 midterm elections. (29) On signing the new districts into law, Governor Abbott stated that Texas “is “now more red in the United States Congress.” (26)

6. Several policies can help to restore and protect free and fair elections, including:

a. At the Federal level, pass legislation to protect voting, including the John Lewis Voting Rights Act and the Freedom to Vote Act.

- The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act will modernize and revitalize the Voting Rights Act of 1965, strengthening legal protections against discriminatory voting policies and practices. (30)
- The Freedom to Vote Act, which has already passed the House, represents a major step toward curbing political gamesmanship in map drawing. The bill would enhance transparency, strengthen protections for communities of color, and ban partisan gerrymandering in congressional redistricting. It would also improve voters’ ability to challenge gerrymandered maps in court. (31)

b. Reduce the corrosive effect of money on our elections.

- Since the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling in 2010, massive amounts of dark money have poured into our elections.
- The Brennan Center points out “The campaign finance system is broken. Super PACs and shadowy nonprofits give enormous sway to the super-wealthy and big corporations.” (33)
- The best long-term solution is to overturn the Supreme Court ruling in Citizens’ United, which made it easier for corporations and other entities to spend unlimited amounts to influence elections anonymously. But that is a long-term and difficult process. In the meantime, there are specific actions that Congress can take to improve transparency and reduce the outsized influence of big money in our elections: (33)

- i. Congress should pass the DISCLOSE Act, and states should require all groups engaged in political spending in state races to disclose their donors. The Disclose Act would ensure that voters know the identity of donors who have been secretly financing campaign expenditures in federal elections. In the Citizens’ United decision, **the Supreme Court affirmed both the right of corporations to donate to campaigns, and the importance of disclosure, stating:**

“The First Amendment protects political speech; and disclosure permits citizens and shareholders to react to the speech of corporate entities in a proper way. This transparency enables the electorate to make informed decisions and give proper weight to different speakers and messages.”
(34)

- ii. Match small donations - All levels of governments should enact a way to amplify the voices of regular people in elections and incentivize candidates to seek out broad support. Small donor public financing that provides a multiple match on modest donations has proven especially effective. (35)
- iii. Protect against foreign money – Congress should pass legislation which would require greater transparency for online ads and make it harder for foreign powers to funnel money into American elections. Texas should do the same for state elections. (36)

c. In Texas, make voter registration easier, expand early voting, and protect mail-in voting

- **Make voter registration easier, including on-line registration and same-day registration.** Every year, over 4 million people move - either moving into the state or moving within it. Another 300,000 Texans turn 18 and become eligible to vote. This means that in a two-year election cycle, almost 9 million Texans need to register or update their voter registration. (37)
- **Expand early voting,** to make it easier for working Texans to get to the polls.
- **Protect mail-in voting.**
- **Ensure there are enough polling places in each community.**

d. Establish an independent redistricting commission in Texas to protect against the distortions caused by gerrymandering

- Because the legislature in Texas draws district boundaries, those boundaries can be created to unduly benefit the party in power, as has happened in 2025.
- Several states, including Colorado, Michigan and Missouri, have established independent redistricting commissions (IRC's) to draw the boundaries. This removes legislators from the process.
- Effective IRC's require the commissioners to adhere to strict criteria, such as complying with federal and state constitutions, equal population, protecting minorities, partisan fairness, compactness, and contiguity. **For example, Texas Congressional District 13 would not be drawn to include the far north panhandle north of Amarillo and part of the Dallas-Ft. Worth Metroplex!**
- IRC's also require the commission to hold public hearings, make the data being used to draw maps publicly available, accept public comments, and allow voters to submit maps to the commission online. (38)
- An Independent Redistricting Commission is popular with Texans in both parties - **77% of Texans support legislation which would establish an independent redistricting commission in Texas to draw legislative districts, including 80% of Democrats and 74% of Republicans.** The only people who support gerrymandering game-playing are the politicians trying to protect their seats. (39)

More Information

1. Brennan Center, Dark Money Project, <https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/reform-money-politics/influence-big-money/dark-money> - several articles and analysis about **how dark money is distorting our elections.** (in general, the Brennan Center has extensive information about our elections)
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5. More information on the Freedom to Vote Act -

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