

Background on Voting Rights

January 2, 2022



Top Line

1. Americans strongly support the right to vote. 91% of us say voting is “essential to our own sense of freedom”. (1)
2. However, the US has a less effective democracy than most other large, advanced countries.
3. Americans care about:
 - Eligible voters being able to vote, **and**
 - Ineligible voters not being able to vote
4. While a minority of Americans are most concerned about voter fraud, it is actually extremely rare.
5. On the other hand, many eligible voters are prevented from voting because of voter suppression.
6. Policies to protect voting rights while ensuring election integrity include:
 - a. Reasonable ID requirements, that are not designed to unduly affect specific populations
 - b. Making it easier to register to vote
 - c. Making it easier to vote – including early voting, expanded locations and hours, and voting by mail
 - d. Ending partisan gerrymandering by establishing independent redistricting commissions
 - e. Controls to prevent purges of legitimate voters from the rolls
 - f. Reducing the influence of money in politics by tightening campaign finance laws

America’s democracy lags other advanced countries and needs work. We should pursue policies that ensure election integrity, while more importantly lowering barriers for eligible voters to vote.

Backup

1. Americans strongly support the right to vote.

- a. 91% of Americans say voting "is essential to their own sense of freedom." (1)
- b. 57% of Americans believe voting is a right for every US citizen and should not be restricted (vs. a privilege that can be limited).
 - This differs widely by party affiliation, and explains why Republicans and Democrats have different priorities when it comes to the rules for voting.
 - 78% of Democrats believe voting is a right that should not be restricted. Only 32% of Republicans agree with this.
 - 67% of Republicans believe that "voting is a privilege that comes with responsibilities and can be limited." Only 21% of Democrats agree with this. (2)

2. However, the US has a less effective democracy than most other large advanced countries.

- a. Two independent organizations – The Economist and Freedom House - assess political rights by country. Among the 17 advanced countries with at least 8 million people, the US ranks near the bottom on both of these assessments.
 - o The Economist's Intelligence Unit determines a "Democracy Index" by country each year. The Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. (3)
 - o Freedom House determines a "Political Rights Score" by country each year based on a number of factors which address the electoral process, functioning of government, political pluralism and participation. (4)
 - o Among 17 large, advanced countries in 2020 the US ranked 13th on the Democracy Index and 17th – dead last – on the Political Rights Score.
 - o The 17 countries and their 2020 scores and rankings are shown in Appendix 1.
- b. Issues with democracy in the US which result in these low rankings include:
 - o Partisan gerrymandering
 - o Partisan voter suppression
 - o Barriers to participation (registration and voting)
 - o Misinformation

- o Excessive influence of money, including “dark money” in which the donor is not identified.
- c. Freedom House points out:
 - o “A decade ago, the United States received a score of 94 out of 100 in *Freedom in the World*, Freedom House’s annual report on political rights and civil liberties.
 - o That put it in the company of other established democracies, such as France and Germany.
 - o Today [in 2021], whereas those former peers remain at 90 or above, the United States has fallen to a score of 83, leaving it in a cohort with newer democracies like Romania, Croatia, and Panama.
 - o The prominence and global influence of the United States mean that its woes have a uniquely damaging effect on democracy in the rest of the world. (14)
- d. The strength of our democracy also varies by state. Texas and Georgia, which have a track record of voter suppression, rank as the hardest states in which to vote. And this is before those states adopted new voter restrictions in 2021 that make it even harder to vote. See appendix 2 for the rankings by state.
- e. As a result of these issues, Americans have low confidence in our democracy. A recent Gallup poll found **that only 32% of Americans say they are proud of our political system.** (5)

3. Americans care about both eligible voters being able to vote, and ineligible voters not being able to vote

- a. When asked “Which concerns you more – Making sure everyone who wants to vote can do so or making sure that no one votes who is not eligible”, results varied significantly by party. (6)
 - i. Most Democrats (85%) chose “Making sure that everyone who wants to vote can do so”
 - ii. But most Republicans (75%) chose “Making sure that no one votes who is not eligible.
- b. This difference in priorities helps to explain why Democrats and Republicans see voting issues so differently – they have different goals.

- c. **More Americans are concerned that every citizen is able to vote (56%) than making sure that no one votes who is ineligible (41%).** This makes sense, because voter fraud is not a significant issue, but voter suppression is (see sections 4 and 5)
- d. Results of the survey are summarized in the table below.

Concerns about Voting

	Total	Dem	Rep	Indep
Which concerns you more:				
- Making sure that everyone who wants to vote can do so	56%	85%	25%	52%
- Making sure that no one votes who is not eligible	41%	12%	75%	47%

Source: NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist survey, July 2, 2021,
<https://www.npr.org/2021/07/02/1012302107/poll-more-americans-are-concerned-about-voting-access-than-fraud-prevention>

4. While some Americans are concerned about voter fraud, it is actually extremely rare

- a. The Heritage Foundation tracks voter fraud cases. (7)
 - i. Their database stretches back more than 30 years, and in that time, they have found only 1,333 cases of "proven" voter fraud, or less than 45 per year.
 - ii. Given hundreds of millions of votes cast in the US in every election cycle, this means **a rate of far less than one in a million.**
- b. The Brennan Center has analyzed and summarized dozens of analyses of potential voter fraud, by journalists, universities, and state government that found voter fraud is virtually non-existent. This included examination of allegations of voter fraud following the 2020 election. (8)
- c. Based on this analysis, the Brennan Center concluded:

- i. **“The verdict is in from every corner that voter fraud is sufficiently rare that it simply could not and does not happen at the rate even approaching that which would be required to “rig” an election.**
 - ii. Electoral integrity is key to our democracy, and politicians who genuinely care about protecting our elections should focus not on phantom fraud concerns, but on those abuses that actually threaten election security.
 - iii. As historians and election experts have catalogued, there is a long history in this country of racially suppressive voting measures — including poll taxes and all-white primaries — put in place under the guise of stopping voter fraud that wasn’t actually occurring in the first place.
 - iv. The surest way toward voting that is truly free, fair, and accessible is to know the facts in the face of such rhetoric.” (8)
- d. Conservative media outlets that have alleged widespread voter fraud have had to issue corrections.
- i. Following the 2020 election, both Fox and Newsmax aired numerous accusations about voter fraud, specifically manipulation of voting machines.
 - ii. In response to lawsuits, both networks issued statements clarifying that **they had no facts to back up these allegations.**
 - iii. The statement by Newsmax included: "No evidence has been offered that Dominion or Smartmatic used software or reprogrammed software that manipulated votes in the 2020 election." (9)

5. On the other hand, many eligible voters are prevented from voting because of voter suppression

- a. The Brennan Center for Justice reports:
 - i. "Over the last 20 years, states have put barriers in front of the ballot box — imposing strict voter ID laws, cutting voting times, restricting registration, and purging voter rolls.
 - ii. These efforts, which received a boost when the Supreme Court weakened the Voting Rights Act in 2013, have kept significant numbers of eligible voters from the polls, hitting all Americans, but placing special burdens on racial minorities, poor people, and young and old voters." (10)

- b. Voter suppression efforts in Georgia prevented an estimated 87,000 voters from voting in 2018. (11)
 - i. Suppression tactics include "strategies such as reducing polling locations in predominantly African American or Lantinx neighborhoods, or only having polling stations open during business hours, when many disenfranchised populations are working and unable to take time off."
- c. Nationwide, American Public Media Reports found that the 17 states with the strictest registration deadlines last fall — between 28 and 30 days before Election Day — had, on average, lower voter turnout. (11)
- d. The American Bar Association found that “in 2019, Georgia and Wisconsin each purged between 100,000 and 200,000 people from the voter rolls. A court halted Texas’s effort to purge 90,000 voters, many found to be newly naturalized citizens”. (12)
- e. In a ranking of "ease of voting", Georgia and Texas, two states often mentioned as active in voter suppression, rank at the bottom for ease of voting. (See Appendix 2)

6. Policies at the national and state level are needed to strengthen our democracy.

- a. Policies to protect voting rights while ensuring election integrity include:
 - i. Reasonable ID requirements, that are not designed to unduly affect specific populations
 - ii. Making it easier to register to vote
 - iii. Making it easier to vote – including early voting, expanded locations and hours, and voting by mail
 - iv. Ending partisan gerrymandering by establishing independent redistricting commissions
 - v. Controls to prevent purges of legitimate voters from the rolls
 - vi. Reducing the influence of money in our politics by tightening campaign finance laws
- b. These policies are generally popular with Americans, although more strongly with Democrats given their greater concern that eligible voters be able to vote. (13)

Americans are supportive of many voting reforms

	Total	Dem	Rep	Indep
Requiring photo ID to vote	72%	56%	91%	72%
Automatic registration when you get a driver's license	60%	76%	47%	46%
Able to register on voting day	53%	69%	38%	45%
Early voting, without requiring a reason	52%	75%	32%	36%
Voting by mail, without requiring a reason	52%	78%	26%	41%

Source: Associated Press, "Public Supportive of Many Voting Reforms", April 2, 2021, <https://apnorc.org/projects/public-supportive-of-many-voting-reforms/>

More Information

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2. **Freedom House**, "From Crisis to Reform: A call to strengthen America's battered democracy", March 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2021/crisis-reform-call-strengthen-americas-battered-democracy>
3. **Voting Rights Lab** – non-partisan non profit organization that tracks election-related legislation. Website is <https://votingrightslab.org/>.

Sources

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10. Brennan Center, "Vote Suppression",
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11. American Public Media, October 28, 2019,
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13. Associated Press, April 2, 2021,
<https://apnorc.org/projects/public-supportive-of-many-voting-reforms/>
14. Freedom House, "From Crisis to Reform: A call to strengthen America's battered democracy", March 2021,
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2021/crisis-reform-call-strengthen-americas-battered-democracy>

Appendix 1 - Political Freedom, National Rankings

Country	Democracy Index 2020 (The Economist)	Political Rights Score (Freedom House)	Rank			
			Democracy Index	Political Rights Score	Average of Rankings	Combined Rank
Australia	8.96	40	3	1	2	3
Austria	8.16	37	8	11	9.5	9
Belgium	7.51	39	17	6	11.5	12
Canada	9.24	40	2	1	1.5	2
Czechia	7.67	36	16	13	14.5	15
France	7.99	38	12	10	11	11
Germany	8.67	39	6	6	6	7
Israel	7.84	33	14	15	14.5	16
Italy	7.74	36	15	13	14	14
Japan	8.13	40	9	1	5	5
Korea (Republic of)	8.01	33	11	15	13	13
Netherlands	8.96	40	4	1	2.5	4
Spain	8.12	37	10	11	10.5	10
Sweden	9.26	40	1	1	1	1
Switzerland	8.83	39	5	6	5.5	6
United Kingdom	8.54	39	7	6	6.5	8
United States	7.92	32	13	17	15	17

Sources:

Democracy score, the Economist - <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>

Political Rights Score, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

Appendix 2 - Ease of Voting rank by state

States, sorted by ease of voting	
State	Ease of Voting Rank
Oregon	1
Washington	2
Utah	3
Illinois	4
Maryland	5
Hawaii	6
Colorado	7
North Dakota	8
Vermont	9
California	10
Massachusetts	11
Virginia	12
Michigan	13
Maine	14
Minnesota	15
New Jersey	16
New York	17
Idaho	18
Rhode Island	19
Connecticut	20
Montana	21
Nebraska	22
North Carolina	23
Iowa	24
Wisconsin	25
Wyoming	26
Louisiana	27
Nevada	28
South Dakota	29
Arizona	30
New Mexico	31
Pennsylvania	32
Delaware	33
Ohio	34
West Virginia	35
Alaska	36
Oklahoma	37
Kansas	38
Alabama	39
Florida	40
Indiana	41
Arkansas	42
Kentucky	43
South Carolina	44
New Hampshire	45
Tennessee	46
Mississippi	47
Missouri	48
Georgia	49
Texas	50

States ease of voting, sorted alpha	
State	Ease of Voting Rank
Alabama	39
Alaska	36
Arizona	30
Arkansas	42
California	10
Colorado	7
Connecticut	20
Delaware	33
Florida	40
Georgia	49
Hawaii	6
Idaho	18
Illinois	4
Indiana	41
Iowa	24
Kansas	38
Kentucky	43
Louisiana	27
Maine	14
Maryland	5
Massachusetts	11
Michigan	13
Minnesota	15
Mississippi	47
Missouri	48
Montana	21
Nebraska	22
Nevada	28
New Hampshire	45
New Jersey	16
New Mexico	31
New York	17
North Carolina	23
North Dakota	8
Ohio	34
Oklahoma	37
Oregon	1
Pennsylvania	32
Rhode Island	19
South Carolina	44
South Dakota	29
Tennessee	46
Texas	50
Utah	3
Vermont	9
Virginia	12
Washington	2
West Virginia	35
Wisconsin	25
Wyoming	26

Source: Northern Illinois University, October 2020.
<https://bigthink.com/politics-current-affairs/states-easy-voting>