

Voting: Threats to this fundamental right in democracies

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The right to vote is a freedom that is key to American democracy. The right to vote in the United States, until recently, had expanded to allow almost all U.S. citizens over the age of 18 to vote. An exception in some states bars citizens who have been convicted of a felony from voting. In the first presidential election in 1789, only white, property-owning men over 21 could vote. Since then, the struggle to expand the right to vote has resulted first in the inclusion of non-property-owning white men, then all men regardless of race, and eventually women and citizens over 18. Access to voting has been made more accessible by such methods as mail-in voting, early voting, Sunday voting, longer voting hours, and assistance to allow disabled citizens to vote.

More recently, however, increasing efforts are being made to suppress the vote in some states. In 2006, Indiana passed the first strict, photo ID voter requirement, and such laws have since spread to 36 states. The rationale given for strict voter ID was fraud and voting by non-citizens. However, studies by organizations, including the conservative Heritage Center, show minuscule fraud. One such study, covering 25 years of voting in Arizona, showed a minuscule 0.0000845% of votes being fraudulent. Incidents of non-citizens voting are rare as reported in 2020 by the conservative Cato Institute. The penalty for non-citizens voting is severe.

Voter ID laws – especially the strict, government-issued, photo ID laws – do effectively disenfranchise some voters. While proponents argue that this requirement is not burdensome, these laws are partisan and designed to make voting harder for demographic groups who tend to vote for Democrats, including low-income people, People of Color, younger people, and transgender people.

Laws which effectively disenfranchise voters are anti-democratic and may weaken democratic principles and practices. The most stringent effort to disenfranchise voters is the [SAVE America Act](#) (and the similar but stalled SAVE Act), passed by the House of Representatives but being held at bay by the Senate's filibuster. If enacted, it would undermine voter participation in elections, a fundamental tenet of liberal democracies. These bills would block millions of eligible American citizens from voting. The bill would effectively require voters to produce a passport or a birth certificate to register to vote – documents that some 21 million Americans don't have ready access to. They would also have to show their papers in person, meaning they could no longer register to vote by

mail or online. The same process would be required to make any change to a voter's registration, including name, mailing address, or party affiliation.

One major documentation requirement would be to match your birth certificate with your current photo ID. This would affect transgender persons, married women, some religious sisters, and anyone else who has changed their name since birth. While most middle- and upper-class citizens may not find this burdensome, the process for locating birth certificates and other documents can be difficult, especially for those who move often, do not drive, or have been affected by disasters. The bill's in-person requirement could disenfranchise 50 million rural voters who would have to travel great distances to register to vote. A [detailed explanation of the SAVE Act](#) can be accessed at the Brookings Institution, and the Brennan Center for Justice has published [an article on two new versions of the bill](#) being introduced and debated in Congress.

The persistence of misinformation and unproven accusations of fraud in elections have led to mistrust of our election systems. Even credible studies, including [one on the 2016 presidential election](#) commissioned by Trump's Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, have failed to quell growing mistrust in election systems.

Most Americans are ignorant of the processes and protections that make U.S. elections safe, secure, and free from fraud. An article from the American Bar Association, "[Understanding American Elections and Why They are Trustworthy](#)," details how our elections are safe and free of fraud.

There are several ways that individuals can help themselves and others to learn the processes and protections of the election system in their state. You might attend your county Board of Elections meetings. These are open meetings: ask questions, talk to the members of the election board. You could volunteer to work at the polls. You could volunteer to be a poll observer inside of a voting place. (Depending on your state regulations, you may have to be appointed by one of the political parties, since a limited number of viewers can be in the room.)

Finally, mentally review the steps you went through the last time you voted. Try to imagine how a person could vote fraudulently. Remember that your ballot is linked to your address, since there is not a uniform ballot shared by all voters in your state. North Carolina, for example, has over 2000 different ballots. All the ballots in your state will have the same national and statewide sections, but the ballot diverges after that so your ballot reflects what electoral district you are in, what school district, what county, what city and the people running for these offices.

Other articles next month will discuss ways to be involved in the election and protections in our electoral system to prevent fraud.

“The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.”

—Lyndon B. Johnson, [remarks at signing of Voting Rights Act](#), 06 August 1965