NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

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Voting
How Should We Safeguard and Improve Our Elections?

Many Americans are concerned about the integrity of US elections. Recent surveys show that a majority of voters lack confidence in the fairness and honesty of the electoral process and a growing number worry about its safety and security.

The coronavirus pandemic has complicated many aspects of how we vote in 2020. But even before the outbreak, there were widespread concerns about the election system. The problems are complex and take many forms.

- US voter turnout is consistently among the lowest in the developed world. While nearly all adult citizens are legally eligible to vote, many never—or only rarely—exercise their right to participate. Tens of millions of eligible Americans are unregistered.

- Many systems used in local and state elections are outdated, inefficient, and vulnerable to interference. These include old voting machines, out-of-date registration lists, and voter databases that are prone to hacking and sabotage. Intelligence officials have warned of increased meddling in US elections by foreign nations.

- The rules governing the election system are a patchwork of local, state, and federal laws. A convicted felon can vote in Maine, but not in Maryland. A valid photo ID is required of all voters at the polls in Indiana, but not in Illinois. These rules are confusing and often inconsistent.

- In recent years, many states have passed new laws that change who is eligible to vote, how absentee ballots are counted, and other key aspects of the voting system. These laws are often the result of partisan efforts not to improve how elections work, but to gain political advantage for one party over another.
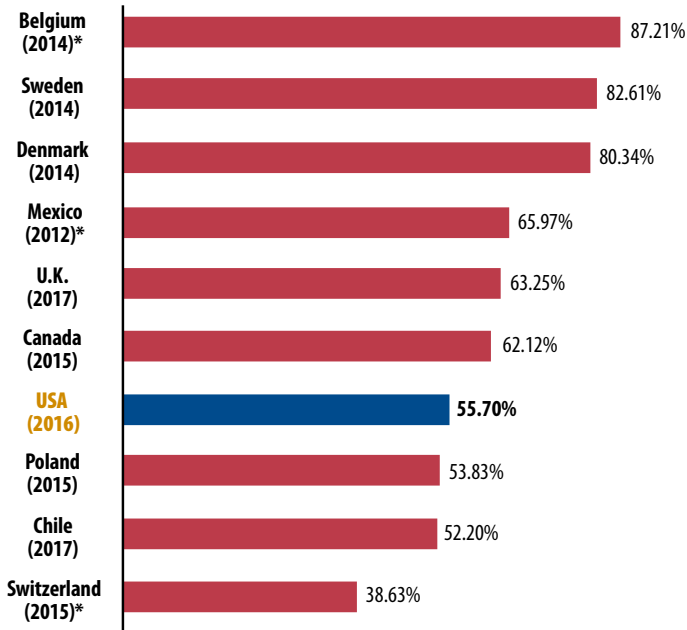
Today, Americans wonder whether they will be able to cast their ballots as usual on Election Day, whether their votes will be accurately counted, and whether national, state, and local voting systems will be safe from hacking, foreign meddling, and other problems.

How should we ensure that our elections are fair, efficient, and secure? What should we do so people can vote with confidence and trust that the outcomes accurately represent the will of the people? **How should we safeguard and improve our elections?**

This issue advisory presents three options for deliberation, each rooted in a different way of responding to the issue. Each option includes a range of practical actions as well as important trade-offs to consider.

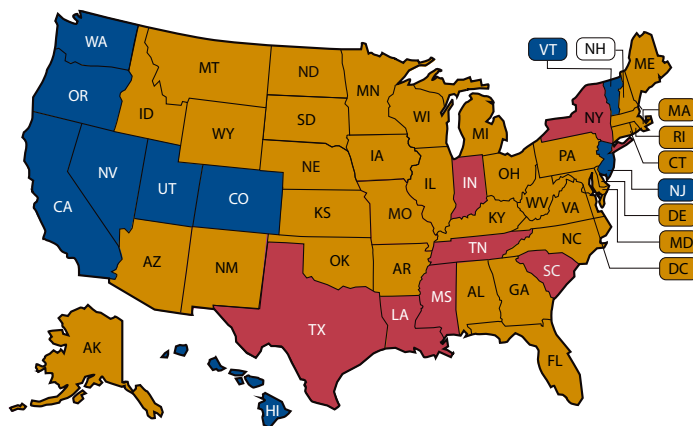## The United States Trails Most Developed Countries in Voter Turnout.

Votes cast in most recent national elections as a percentage of the voting age population

Country	Percentage
Belgium (2014)*	87.21%
Sweden (2014)	82.61%
Denmark (2014)	80.34%
Mexico (2012)*	65.97%
U.K. (2017)	63.25%
Canada (2015)	62.12%
USA (2016)	**55.70%**
Poland (2015)	53.83%
Chile (2017)	52.20%
Switzerland (2015)*	38.63%

* Voting in Belgium is compulsory by national law and is compulsory in one Swiss canton.

Source: Pew Research Center

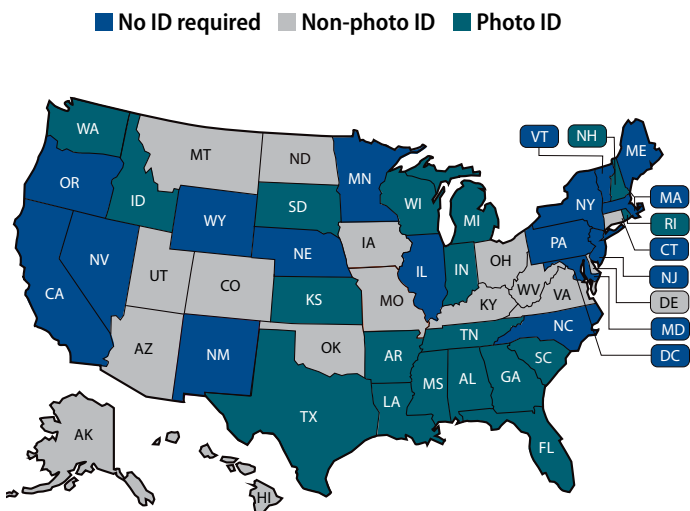## More Than 75% of Americans Can Already Vote by Mail.

Mail voting rules for the 2020 election:
■ Ballots mailed ■ Absentee allowed for all ■ Excuse required

Sources: Secretary of State offices; U.S. Election Assistance Commission; National Conference of State Legislatures; Ballotpedia.org; United States Census Bureau; the Cook Political Report

Voter Identification Requirements by State

■ No ID required ■ Non-photo ID ■ Photo ID

Source: Ballotpedia

Five US Presidents Were Elected to Office but Lost the Popular Vote.

YEAR	CANDIDATE		PERCENTAGE OF POPULAR VOTE
1824	Jackson		42.3%
	Adams		36.1%
1876	Tilden		50.9%
	Hayes		47.9%
1888	Cleveland		48.6%
	Harrison		47.8%
2000	Gore		48.4%
	Bush		47.9%
2016	Clinton		48.2%
	Trump		46.1%

■ Lost the election ■ Won the election

Source: Pew Research Center

Many eligible Americans do not participate in elections. In the last presidential election, almost 92 million eligible voters never cast a ballot. The share is even higher in state, local, and city elections. One important reason is that voting is more difficult than it needs to be. People must register in advance, take time off from work, and endure long lines at the polls. There are also structural barriers in place that keep eligible people from voting, including new laws that complicate the registration process, limit early voting, and make photo IDs a requirement for casting a ballot. These laws disproportionately affect minority and low-income voters. Many of them stem from partisan efforts not to make elections work better, but to gain political advantage. For our democratic system to be fair and representative, we need to address these problems and give more people a voice in our political decision-making process.

A Primary Drawback

Most of the people who are informed on the issues and wish to vote are already voting. Pushing unmotivated, uninformed people to vote won't improve the democratic process or lead to better government.

Things We Might Do	Drawbacks and Trade-Offs
Give all voters the option to vote by mail, using bar-coded ballots and careful signature comparisons.	Some ballots will be stolen, lost, or invalidated due to mail service delays.
Make Election Day a national holiday.	This will hurt small businesses by forcing them either to close on Election Day or pay their workers more to stay open.
Expand early voting everywhere, allowing it to take place for a week or more.	Keeping polling places open and staffed will be a huge investment for local governments and may require federal funding.
Allow automatic or same-day voter registration.	This will lead to more congestion and further delays at polling places.
What else could we do?	**What's the trade-off if we do that?**

Option Two: Protect the Integrity of Voting

Recent elections have alerted us to many vulnerabilities within the voting system. These include the relative ease of voting machine hacking, threats to voter registration systems and voter privacy, out-of-date registration lists, mismanagement of mail-in ballots, and inadequate staffing and resources at polling places. In addition, US intelligence officials have warned that Russia, China, and other nations will be trying to meddle in the 2020 election and influence the outcomes to favor their interests. These vulnerabilities weaken people's faith and, if left unaddressed, put the proper functioning of our democracy at risk. Our top priority must be to ensure that elections are lawful, accurate, and secure.

A Primary Drawback

Increased security will make voting more complicated for ordinary voters and local election boards and end up driving many voters away from the polls, thereby making elections less inclusive and representative.

Things We Might Do	Drawbacks and Trade-Offs
Require photo ID for all federal, state, and local elections.	Making voter IDs a requirement will deprive millions of the basic right to vote. An estimated 11 percent of eligible voters lack valid IDs.
Limit absentee or mail-in voting by requiring that voters provide a valid reason, such as travel or illness, for not voting in person.	This adds paperwork. People should be able to vote absentee for any reason that makes it difficult for them to go to the polls.
Replace digital voting machines with technologies that produce voter-verified paper ballots that cannot be hacked. Mandate that all election boards keep a paper trail of online votes.	Paper-based voting systems are slow and inefficient. Some election outcomes will not be known for days or weeks after the ballots have been cast.
Establish a national cybersecurity agency charged with keeping campaign computer systems safe from hacking and sabotage.	This would give the federal government increased power and influence over local and state elections and could be used for partisan purposes.
What else could we do?	**What's the trade-off if we do that?**

Option Three: Change the Rules to Make Elections More Fair

Expanding voter participation and making elections more secure will not fix the underlying flaws in the system. We need the kind of broad reforms that will make elections more efficient and more responsive to the will of the people. These include replacing the Electoral College with a nationwide popular vote (a proposal supported by a majority of American adults, according to recent surveys) and ranked-choice voting, a system in which people rank candidates in order of preference, which has proven to be more fair and more representative than the current winner-take-all system. Changing how elections work can give voters a stronger hand in shaping election outcomes, reduce the most extreme partisanship, and help restore public confidence in the democratic process.

A Primary Drawback

These reforms change traditional systems that have worked well and will end up confusing many voters. We should work on improving the system we have, not inventing a new one.

Things We Might Do	Drawbacks and Trade-Offs
Replace the Electoral College so the presidential candidate with the most votes nationwide wins.	This will require changing the Constitution and give less populous, rural states less say in the outcome, which could result in their needs being ignored.
Minimize voter confusion and potential election mishaps by eliminating the patchwork of state and local election commissions and replacing them with a centralized system.	Local and state election commissions are one of the best protections we have against interference. Centralizing the system will make it easier to hack.
Create independent, nonpartisan commissions in each state to redraw congressional districts so officials can't influence elections to favor their own party.	In some legislative districts, rural and minority groups will lose power.
Replace winner-take-all elections with a more representative system in which voters can pick their first, second, and third choices among the candidates.	Some elections will be won by second- or third-choice candidates who lack broad support from a majority of voters.
What else could we do?	**What's the trade-off if we do that?**

About This Issue Advisory

Can we trust our elections to be fair and secure? Increasing numbers of American voters aren't sure any more. This issue advisory is designed to help people deliberate together about what we should do to keep our election system fair, honest, and secure. The three options presented here reflect different ways of understanding what is at stake and shed light on the critical tensions in what we hold most valuable.

Ground Rules

- **Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.**
- **Consider all options fairly.**
- **Listening is just as important as speaking.**
- **No one or two individuals should dominate.**
- **Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.**
- **Everyone is encouraged to participate.**

Holding a Deliberative Forum

1. Introduction

Review ground rules.
Introduce the issue.

2. Connect to Issue

Ask people to describe how the issue affects them, their families, or friends.

3. Consider Each Option

Consider each option one at a time.
Allow equal time for each.
- **What is attractive?**
- **What about the drawbacks?**

4. Review and Reflect

Review the conversation as a group.
- **What areas of common ground were apparent?**
- **What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?**
- **Who else do we need to hear from?**

How Should We Safeguard and Improve Our Elections?

Community Forum Worksheet

NOW THAT YOU HAVE DELIBERATED IN YOUR FORUM, you and others in your community can use this worksheet to continue considering ideas about what might be done about this problem. Here is a reminder of actions you discussed in your forums:

 a. Create nonpartisan commissions to draw up congressional districts.

 b. Ensure that all voting systems are backed up by paper ballots.

 c. Eliminate the electoral college; the winner should be the candidate with the most popular votes.

 d. Allow same-day voter registration.

 e. Allow absentee voting only to voters with a valid reason, such as illness or travel.

 f. Give all voters the option of voting by mail.

 g. Replace state and local election commissions with a centralized federal election system.

 h. Expand early voting to at least a week.

 i. Require photo ID for all elections,

 j. Form a national cybersecurity agency to protect voting computers from hacking and sabotage.

 k. Make election day a national holiday

 l. Replace winner-take-all elections with a more representative system in which voters pick their first, second, and third choices.

1. Which **three** actions above (a-l) do you most strongly support? _____ _____ _____

2. Which **three** actions above (a-l) do you most strongly oppose? _____ _____ _____

3. Are there any actions above you still feel **unsure** about? _____

_____

_____

_____

4. What else could be done in your community, state, or nationally to address this problem?

_____

_____

_____

5. Did you talk about aspects of the issue you hadn't considered before?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If so, please explain. _____

_____

_____

6. Were there ideas or proposals that you tended to favor coming into the forum that you now have second thoughts about?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If so, please explain. _____

_____

_____

Please give this worksheet to your moderator when you have filled it out, email to forumreports@nifi.org, or mail to: National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.

This worksheet is also available online at www.nifi.org/questionnaires.