



DEMOCRACY

PLAYBOOK

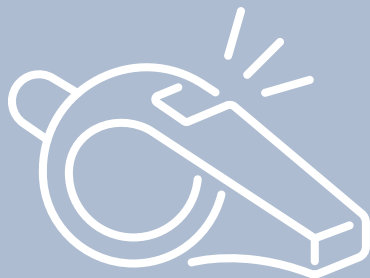


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Debbie Cox Bultan

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INTRODUCTION

America has been a global beacon of democracy for nearly 250 years. The most important professional commitment we ever made was when we took our oath of office – to faithfully carry out our duties while upholding not only our state constitutions, but the U.S. Constitution. We are proud to be part of this nation’s long tradition of representative democracy.

Protecting – and strengthening – our democracy is of the utmost importance. It is why we agreed to co-chair this working group. It is why we convened elected leaders and prominent experts to discuss opportunities to improve our election process. While the previous elections have been the most secure in U.S. history, we cannot rest on our laurels. While good processes can be made better, we must also recognize that the tactics and attempts to undermine democracy are constant and shifting. Our efforts must keep pace in the face of relentless attacks.

As we look ahead, we want to examine best practices related to voting. While we cannot dismiss the huge toll the COVID-19 pandemic took on families across the world, we can learn lessons from how states and localities made voting safer and easier without sacrificing security. And even though some politicians look to resurrect Jim Crow-era voter suppression tactics, many states are finding ways to increase access to the polls.

Importantly, elected officials cannot do this alone. That’s why we spoke to business and civic engagement experts about ways all of us can come together and strengthen our civic fabric. A strong, healthy democracy benefits us all, and we all have a role to play.

We are proud that American democracy has stood strong for hundreds of years, even though the past several years have tested our resolve. While January 6 will remain a dark stain in America’s history, recent elections contain bright spots that point to a hopeful, brighter future.

In both 2020 and the subsequent midterms in 2022, many state and local officials of both major political parties carried out their duties with honor and integrity, despite receiving numerous threats. For example, Philadelphia’s Al Schmidt, a lifelong Republican, defended the city’s election and vote-counting process even in the face of attacks from then-President Trump.

While the dam of democracy held against a wave of authoritarian forces, we cannot ignore the cracks that have formed due to the malfeasance of unscrupulous actors.

In the pages that follow, we lay out dozens of tangible, practical steps that state and local elected officials can take to strengthen the election process. Many of these best practices come from states and localities that have made a commitment to prioritize making voting as easy and safe as possible. This report focuses on three key areas of democracy:

- ★ **Election integrity**, including how to increase transparency around the election process, methods to increase election integrity, how to communicate about the security of elections, and ways to protect the people who make their successful administration possible;
- ★ **Voting access**, including how to ensure every citizen can safely and easily vote, whether early, by mail, or in-person; and
- ★ **Civic engagement**, including how elected officials can work with community leaders, businesses, schools and others to promote civic education both on the importance of elections and other ways to engage in our democracy.

Strategies range from how to recruit poll workers to ways to combat misinformation to specific legislation that makes registering to vote easier and more secure.

We know that elections don't just happen. Preparing for and running elections takes time, energy, staffing, and funding. It is a 365-day a year venture, every year. That's why we are publishing this report nearly two years ahead of the next major national election, outlining what various offices should be doing over the next 20-plus months.

In the end, good-faith Americans across the political spectrum want the same thing: free, fair, and safe elections. To be successful, we must continue to innovate and adapt. We must never forget that creating a more perfect union takes continual, intentional effort. We hope these strategies help policymakers across the nation – and across the political spectrum – do their part in that creation process.

Jocelyn Benson

Secretary of State, Michigan
Working Group Co-Chair

Adrian Fontes

Secretary of State, Arizona
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Sandra Jauregui

Assemblymember, Nevada
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Working Group Co-Chair

A NOTE FROM NEWDEAL FORUM CEO DEBBIE COX BULTAN

First off, I want to express my sincere thanks to Secretary Benson, Secretary Fontes, Assemblywoman Jauregui, and Commissioner Lawrence for co-chairing the Democracy Working Group. And thank you to all the policymakers from our sister organization, NewDEAL, external experts, and staff who helped make this playbook possible.

It is clear, now more than ever, that maintaining and strengthening our democratic institutions cannot be a passive venture. As this document lays out, pro-democracy elected officials – of all parties – must commit to safeguarding free and fair elections. This means using technology to expand access to voter registration as well as expanding opportunities to cast ballots – including during a robust early vote period, no-excuse absentee voting, and on Election Day.

And in order to maintain the faith in the security of our electoral system, election officials must be transparent and open about how ballots are collected and counted. And finally, a healthy democracy is about more than elections and voting. In an increasingly politically polarized society, we must nurture and harness the power of civic engagement to strengthen our communities.

This document is not intended to be an exhaustive list of every possible intervention. The NewDEAL Forum is committed to elevating more solutions to the challenges addressed here, as well as to exploring other topics that need examination.

Past discussions hosted by NewDEAL have considered electoral reforms like Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) and ways to improve the redistricting process. While gerrymandering federal congressional districts garners the bulk of attention from the mainstream media, the problem has impacted state legislatures dramatically. Further, the ways states hold primaries – and when they occur – should also be explored through the lens of strengthening democracy.

All that is to say: The Democracy Playbook is not the end of our work on this issue. While we believe that the recommendations in this document – if implemented in every state – would go a long way to safeguarding our democracy, we will continue to listen to and learn from elected officials and issue-area experts around the country. And we will do all we can to highlight, support, and encourage policies around the nation that strengthen and defend the right of all Americans to have their voices heard and their votes counted.

Debbie Cox Bultan

CEO, the NewDEAL & the NewDEAL Forum

PART I: ELECTION INTEGRITY



Tom Barrett via Unsplash

ELECTION INTEGRITY

Elections do not happen in a vacuum. They take the work, dedication, and effort of hundreds of elected officials and tens of thousands of volunteer and paid poll workers. Election integrity starts with providing the necessary support – in terms of financial support, adequate equipment, and updated laws and policies – to those who run elections.

Americans should be proud that our elections are safe and secure, including the 2020 presidential election and the 2022 midterm election. But as supporters of democracy, we know that systems and processes can always be improved. Voters deserve a system that continues to modernize and adapt to technological advances and new realities without infringing on the right to vote.

While previous elections have been secure, misunderstandings about the election process, combined with unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, lead to questions about election integrity.

Elected officials do not control the mainstream media or social media outlets, but they do have significant power to proactively inform the public about how elections are run. This includes information about voting machine security, the process for counting ballots, and an honest assessment of when votes will be counted. In order to move forward with confidence, elected leaders from secretaries of state to local election officials should prioritize transparency around the election process as well as intentional efforts to increase the security of elections without harming the ability of citizens to cast their ballots.

And when misinformation is spreading, elected leaders have an obligation to correct the record.

“The number one threat to democracy is unending misinformation,” Steve Simon, Minnesota’s Secretary of State, told the NewDEAL Forum Democracy Working Group during an August 2022 discussion. In addition to the potential for violence, misinformation leads to people losing faith in the election process, thus undermining their faith in duly-elected leaders.

Restoring faith in the safety and security of elections is a key way to strengthen our democracy. This section will explore three key components to help increase America’s faith in election integrity:

- ★ **Strengthening Confidence through Transparency**
- ★ **Supporting Election Officials and Poll Workers**
- ★ **Effectively Communicating through the Media**

STRENGTHENING CONFIDENCE THROUGH TRANSPARENCY

As with many aspects of the human condition, fear is often a result of the unknown. Therefore, the more voters understand about the voting process, the less there is to fear. If people don't know what happens to their ballot after their vote is cast, they may be more susceptible to misleading social media posts about nefarious actors throwing ballots in the trash.

As Amy Mitchell, former Director of Journalism Research at Pew, told a group of NewDEAL Leaders in December 2022, "You need facts to get to truth and you need truth to get to a functioning democracy."

Here are ways to get the facts out in order to improve election integrity:



Create Robust Websites. The more voters understand about the election process, the less fear and misinformation can spread. At the most basic level, that means clearly explaining the basics of elections: How citizens can vote, what happens when they vote, and how votes are counted. States, as well as counties that administer elections, can use their online platforms to provide basic information (such as where to vote) as well as to correct misinformation. Websites can also be used to help citizens track their absentee ballots (more information about ballot tracking can be found in the Voting section).

SPOTLIGHT | MINNESOTA

The [Elections Facts](#) section of the Minnesota Secretary of State website is an example of a best practice. The site uses plain language to describe voter registration, what happens before election day, what happens on election day, and how votes are counted at the local level.



Publicly Test Voting Machines. Nearly every jurisdiction [tests voting machines](#) before elections. Yet state and local election officials can (and should) open such testing to the public, thus transparently showing the accuracy of the machines. Widely publicizing the testing is a great way to both engage journalists and blunt potential arguments from bad-faith actors seeking to undermine elections.

Ricky Hatch, the clerk/auditor for Weber County, Utah, told [Governing](#) that publicly testing ballot machines is incredibly useful. "Ninety-nine percent of the people who come through our offices for a tour leave thoroughly impressed, actually shocked, at how much attention we give to every ballot," Hatch said in December, 2021. "It really surprises them and they leave comforted."

SPOTLIGHT | COLORADO



The nonpartisan League of Women Voters of Colorado lauded the state for having an exemplary voting system. In a [2022 report](#), the organization laid out several reasons for the praise, including systems of transparency around the electoral system.

“Colorado’s voting system is considered an election gold standard and exemplifies the League mission: *Empowering Voters. Defending Democracy*,” the report states. “It is a product of evolving improvements, as elected county clerks, the elected Secretary of State, and other stakeholders seek additional means to provide accessibility, security, accuracy, and transparency.”



Incorporate Paper Receipts. According to the [Brennan Center](#), security experts strongly advise states to use paper receipts to provide what is known as a voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT). While the majority of states adhere to this standard, jurisdictions in six states (Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Texas) still use voting machines without a paper trail, as of late 2022. Four of these states (Louisiana, Texas, New Jersey, and Indiana) passed laws to phase out machines without paper receipts, but a lack of funding means many voters will still use older, less secure machines for the time being. Paper trails provide a tangible, secure, and transparent way to verify the accuracy of votes.



Enact Laws to Count Votes in a Timely Way. As more voters opt to cast their ballot early, some states have not adapted their laws to keep up with the increase in volume. Twelve states do not allow election officials to process mail-in ballots before election day, according to [NCSL](#). The states that do not allow this, known as “pre-canvassing,” include key battleground states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Legislators in every state should ensure that laws allow for adequate time for pre-canvassing, so that results can be known in a more timely fashion. In the 2020 election, unscrupulous actors used the delay in ballot counting to lie about nonexistent fraud.

SPOTLIGHT | MARYLAND



In 2022, the Maryland legislature [passed](#) legislation to allow jurisdictions to begin counting mail-in ballots before Election Day, rather than two days after the election. The measure was vetoed by the governor, but many legislators hope to enact the bill under a new administration.



Require Post-Election Audits. A post-election risk-limiting audit consists of election officials publicly hand-counting a sample of paper ballots to show the accuracy of the mechanical counting method used by the county. State legislators should require (and adequately fund) high-quality audits following elections, and Secretaries of States should do all they can to publicize the results.

According to the **Center for American Progress**, such an audit “offer[s] election administrators an effective and efficient way to test the accuracy of an election without breaking the bank.” According to the **Brennan Center**, post-election audits “confirm whether votes are recorded and tallied accurately – and, in turn, help restore public confidence in elections.”

The Center for Democracy and Technology lays out ways to **standardize post-election audits**, in order to distinguish between good-faith audits and “sham reviews” designed to undermine faith in the outcome of an election. Good-faith audits have six general characteristics: professionalism; transparency; use of well-established methods; objectivity and independence; security (including chain of custody); and regular frequency.



Partner with Third-Party Observers. Poll observers play a critical role in ensuring elections are administered fairly. Observers can alert precincts to issues (such as long lines or disturbances at an election site) as well as ensure election officials are not engaging in unlawful voter suppression efforts. Oftentimes, simply the presence of a poll observer ensures that elections run more smoothly. Civic organizations can help recruit and train poll observers (keep in mind that each state has **laws and regulations** regarding how to serve as a poll observer, as well as what observers can and cannot do). In the lead-up to and on Election Day, election officials should view third-party observers as partners, not opponents. Observers operating in good faith have the same objectives as officials: To ensure a fair, safe election.

SPOTLIGHT | LACK OF GOLD STANDARDS

There is no widely-accepted gold standard regarding third-party observers during elections. As some far-right organizations seek to weaponize observers in order to interfere with free and fair elections, state and local elected officials could benefit from specific policy recommendations in this area.

SUPPORTING ELECTION OFFICIALS AND POLL WORKERS

Tens of thousands of poll workers and election officials across the nation are responsible for administering the election. These duties range from identifying polling locations to checking people in to vote to tabulating results. In these previously unassuming (and too-often thankless) jobs, election workers have faced a dramatic increase in violent threats as a result of lies and conspiracy theories. Such political violence is unacceptable in a healthy democracy, and elected leaders must do all in their power to protect election workers. Here are some ways:



Enact Adequate Penalties for Threats. A month after the 2022 midterm election, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson announced to a group of NewDEAL Leaders that her first request of the state legislature in the next session would be a bill to make it a felony to threaten election workers or officials. State legislators should look at the laws on the books and determine if they are adequate for protecting election workers.

SPOTLIGHT | NORTH CAROLINA



In June 2022, state Sen. Jay Chaudhuri, a NewDEAL Leader, **proposed legislation** (SB 916) to stiffen penalties against those who threaten election workers, as well as provide funding to increase security as needed to protect against specific threats. Though the proposal did not become law, it is an example of a best practice other states could follow.



Prosecute All Acts of Voter/Election Intimidation. In the 2022 midterm election, Arizona saw an increase in vote intimidation by armed, masked vigilantes scouring secure drop-boxes and harassing voters. A federal judge banned members of the group accused of coordinating the intimidation efforts from coming within 75 feet of drop boxes. Further, Arizona's Secretary of State **referred** at least 18 cases of intimidation to law enforcement authorities. Elected officials at all levels must work with prosecutors to ensure cases of election violence are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law to prevent the spread of such activity.



Strengthen Election Certification Guidelines. Following the 2020 election, then-President Trump attempted to pressure election officials in Georgia to “find” more than 11,000 votes in an attempt to nullify the will of voters. As a lesson from incidents like that, policymakers should insulate election officials from partisan political pressure during certification. The Brennan Center for Justice **recommends** five possible solutions, including the creation of an advisory board to help depoliticize election administration and certification. Other suggestions include: Prohibiting elected officials responsible from certifying elections from having off-the-record conversations with individuals or groups attempting to influence the certification and developing a robust code of ethics for officials with this responsibility. State legislators should act on these recommendations and strengthen state laws in order to preserve election integrity.

EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING THROUGH THE MEDIA

News is everywhere these days. From television to radio to social media on our phones, there are more sources of news than ever before. Therefore, there is a greater need for elected officials to engage on the issues of voting and elections.

For example, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson is known for being responsive to media questions. Such responsiveness from officials – whether state-level or local – helps build strong solid relationships with the media.

Here are some best practices as described by various members of the NewDEAL Forum Democracy Working Group:



Temper Expectations. It is not possible to convince everyone of the truth all the time. No matter how outlandish, some people will believe conspiracy theories touted by dishonest media outlets and shared on social media. But that is no reason to be silent. The goal is to make incremental progress when informing the public.



Aggressively Counter Misinformation. As the old saying goes: A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes. The 2020 election and aftermath show the damage that lies about elections can do. It is best to address falsehoods quickly and matter-of-factly. When countering the misinformation, use both social media and relationships with reporters.

Many state officials are **partnering** with local officials and civic organizations to reach as many voters as possible with accurate information.

SPOTLIGHT | ARIZONA

Using facts is a good way to counter misinformation, but not the only way, according to Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes. When speaking with NewDEAL Leaders in December 2022, Fontes **acknowledged** that direct, forceful rebuttals are sometimes necessary to push back against nefarious, unAmerican ideas. There cannot be any defense of folks like those who supported or defended the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

“There will be no appeasement from this Secretary of State,” Secretary Fontes said.



Form Relationships with Journalists. Well ahead of elections, be sure that you know the reporters who cover the election/democracy beats. Introduce yourself – via email, on the phone, or over a cup of coffee. Ensure they have your contact information, and take the opportunity to explain how elections work in your state or locality. Be sure to ask if they have any questions or specific areas of interest. As elections are in the news more, election officials must become more comfortable with talking to reporters, ensuring they are a trusted source of information, so reporters can relay correct information in stories.

SPOTLIGHT | MICHIGAN

Ahead of the 2020 and 2022 elections Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson's office hosted multiple well-attended workshops with media to explain the many nuances of election law and administration and answer questions. These workshops improved journalists' understanding of the system enabling them to more easily reject and debunk misinformation on and after Election Day.

PART II: VOTING



Mick Haupt via Unsplash

VOTING

The right to vote is foundational to all other rights in a functioning democracy. If our nation is to be governed “of, by, and for the people,” then all citizens must have an opportunity to select who is in the government.

Voter suppression efforts have a long and ugly history in our nation. From Jim Crow-era reading tests to a 2021 Georgia law drastically reducing the number of early voting days for runoff elections, there has always been a contingent of people in power seeking to deny a voice to those out of power. As recently as 2017, federal courts **struck down** a North Carolina voter suppression law in part because it “target[ed] African-Americans with almost surgical precision.”

Preserving and strengthening the right to vote involves many behind-the-scenes aspects that can dramatically impact how – and if – people can vote. Decisions about polling locations and polling hours can impact who has physical access to the voting booth. And decisions about who can and cannot vote by mail, and what, if any, reasons are needed to do so, played a particularly important role in 2020, when the nation was in the midst of a global pandemic.

This section will discuss best policies and practices related to all aspects of voting. Knowing that America’s elections are safe and secure, the goal of this section is to ensure that as many citizens as want to can vote. Specifically, the section will cover:

- ★ **Voter registration**
- ★ **Polling locations**
- ★ **Casting ballots**

VOTER REGISTRATION

States have wide latitude in how, when, and where citizens can register to vote. Federal law sets minimum guidelines, such as keeping registration open until roughly 30 days before an election. However, many states have adopted pro-voter, pro-democracy reforms that make it significantly easier for citizens to register, including online, in high school, and even on Election Day. Here are best practices related to voter registration.



Enact Automatic Voter Registration. One of the best ways to increase voter registration is to link it with other government services, so that citizens do not need to go through extra steps to register. In 2016, Oregon became the first state to implement Automatic Voter Registration, or AVR, when citizens interacted with the DMV to get their Driver's License. Since then, 21 more states and Washington, D.C., have adopted some sort of AVR, according to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#).

SPOTLIGHT | NEVADA



While some states limit AVR to interactions with the DMV, Nevada will soon integrate automatic voter registration with other agencies. By 2024, AVR [will expand](#) to the state's Department of Health and Human Services so that those who sign up for Medicaid or for health care on the state's exchange will be registered to vote.



Enact Online Registration. The overwhelming majority of states allow online voter registration. Yet eight states still do not allow it, according to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#). The most populous state without online registration is Texas. As more interactions with the government and business occur online, it only makes sense to give citizens the option to register to vote online. It is a safe, secure, and easy way to increase participation in democracy.



Enact Same-Day Registration. As [23 states and Washington, D.C.](#) have shown, it is safe and secure to allow citizens to register to vote on any day, up to and including Election Day. In many states where this is allowed, citizens who register and vote on the same day cast provisional ballots, which are counted once their registration is processed and they are deemed eligible to vote. Research cited by the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) shows that same-day registration increased voter turnout, and **there is no evidence that it benefits one political party over another.** State legislators should prioritize legislation allowing same-day registration as a way to increase access to voting.



Allow Pre-registration. One way several states increased voter participation among young citizens is to allow teenagers as young as 16 to pre-register to vote. In a nutshell, this allows the person to fill out the requisite paperwork so that they are automatically registered to vote on their 18th birthday. According to the **National Conference of State Legislatures**, 24 states and Washington, D.C., allow some people under the age of 18 to pre-register. Most allow pre-registration to begin at age 16, while some wait until 17, and others until 17.5 years of age.

SPOTLIGHT | CALIFORNIA

In 2014, California Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to pre-register to vote. Starting in 2016, the state offered pre-registration online. “Online pre-registration will help more young people vote as soon as they are eligible,” then-Secretary of State Alex Padilla **said** in 2018. “Whether they’re at school or at home or hanging out with friends, young Californians can pre-register to vote in just minutes on their smartphone, tablet or laptop.”



Actively Partner with the Business Community. A healthy democracy benefits everyone, including the business community. And there is no reason to limit pro-voter registration efforts to just political parties or civic organizations. Businesses can participate in a variety of ways, including: Allowing time off for employees to register to vote; hosting voter registration drives in their place of business; and even finding ways to make it easier for people in their community to register to vote, in accordance with state and local laws.

SPOTLIGHT | OHIO

Speaking to a group of NewDEAL Leaders in Philadelphia, David Pepper relayed a story about how Sen. Sharrod Brown (D-OH) partnered with the business community when Brown served as Ohio’s Secretary of State. Brown asked McDonald’s to print a million voter registration forms to be used as tray liners. As he wrote on **Facebook** in 2018, “To this day, if you go to the Board of Elections, you’ll find registration forms with ketchup and mustard stains. We should be making it easier – not harder – to vote.”

POLLING LOCATIONS & HOURS

In states where universal absentee (mail-in) voting is not the norm, the presence and hours of polling locations are critically important to a healthy democracy. When it comes to voting in person, state and local officials dictate both how many polling locations are available, and how long those polling locations stay open. A healthy, vibrant democracy allows voters a high degree of flexibility to participate. In today's world, that means more physical polling locations open more hours so that localities do not leave any voters behind.



Ensure Adequate Number of Polling Locations. In states without universal absentee (mail-in) voting, reducing polling locations and frequently changing polling locations creates “confusion and barriers for voters, potentially disenfranchising” voters, according to [research](#) from the Pew Charitable Trust. Yet many states with a history of race-based voter discrimination have **closed** more than 1,600 polling locations between 2012 and 2018, according to the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

In some cases, communities shutter polling locations due to lack of resources. And many localities are consolidating several polling locations into “vote centers” where anyone in the county can vote. Yet the closure of polling locations tends to happen more often in urban areas and areas with a high percentage of non-white voters compared to white voters, according to a 2018 analysis in [USA Today](#).

As voter habits change (from in-person to early), states and localities must change as well. More research is needed to understand the impact of vote centers on voter participation. Yet local officials, who often have control over selecting polling locations, can pay special attention to how such decisions impact traditionally underserved communities, including areas with large Black, Hispanic, and other racial minorities, as well as college campuses where many young people could vote.



Actively Seek Accessible Polling Locations. In [most states](#), local election officials (usually at the county level) determine polling locations. The decision of where to place polling locations is critical to ensuring equal access to voting. Polling centers should be located conveniently for as many people as possible.

SPOTLIGHT | NEVADA



Clark County, Nevada, home of Las Vegas, is a shining example of how to make voting more accessible through polling locations. During the two-week Early Voting period, Clark County has several permanent voting locations throughout the county, where any county resident can vote. In addition, the county utilizes mobile voting units that operate in a specific location for several days, and then move to another location in the city. Often, these mobile units are set up in places frequented by voters, such as a grocery store parking lot. As with the permanent early vote centers, any county resident can vote at any of the mobile polling locations. By bringing mobile voting units to where voters already are, the county makes it easier for citizens to participate in democracy.



Increase Hours of Polling Locations. No matter how many polling locations there are, state and local officials should seek to increase the number of hours polling locations operate. It is no longer acceptable for polling locations to be open only during normal business hours. State legislators should give maximum flexibility to localities as to how long polling locations can operate. Local officials should seek to extend voting hours well into the evening and on weekends to give voters more time to participate. Both state and local officials should allocate adequate funding to ensure polling locations can operate for the maximum number of hours possible.

SPOTLIGHT | TEXAS



In 2020, Harris County, Texas, home of Houston, opened **24-hour polling locations** in order to increase access for voters. The increase of hours allowed for maximum flexibility for people to vote, including citizens who work non-traditional hours. The effort proved popular with residents of the city, but the state legislature banned the practice as part of a law that imposed a **number of restrictions** on access to voting. Depending on state law, other cities and counties can explore options to follow Harris County's lead.

CASTING BALLOTS

Voting rights are the lynchpin for all other rights in American democracy. And the crux of voting rights is the ability to actually cast a ballot. To ensure a healthy democracy, state legislators must pass legislation to make it easier for citizens to cast their ballot. And state officials, such as secretaries of state, should use their authority to promote pro-voting activities.



Make Early In-Person Voting Easier. As mentioned in the polling locations section, allowing robust early voting is one way to increase voter turnout. Local officials should use every tool available in state law to make early voting as easy and accessible as possible.

- **Allow early voting at any county polling location.** One improvement to early voting is allowing voters to cast their ballot at any early voting location in a given area, usually a county. If allowed under state law, local election officials should implement county-wide voting. If it is not allowed under law, state lawmakers should give localities the authority to do so. Given the technology to make voter rolls accessible anywhere, there is no reason for counties to limit early voting participants to casting their ballots in a specific precinct.



Streamline Absentee Voting. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a massive increase in the use of voting by mail, also known as absentee voting. The percentage of votes cast by mail more than doubled from 2016 to 2020, going from 21% to more than 43%, according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#). State legislators must look at ways to retain and increase access to absentee voting in the future. There are many steps state and local officials can take to make voting by mail easy and convenient in future elections.

- **Vote-by-Mail States.** In eight states (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, and Washington), every registered voter is mailed a ballot, according to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#). All Voters in those states can return their ballot by mail, although the states also have some form of in-person voting available.
- **Enact No-Excuse Absentee Voting.** An additional 28 states and Washington, D.C., allow any citizen to request a ballot by mail for any reason - or no reason. States that restrict absentee voting to a limited number of citizens who must declare a reason for requesting an absentee ballot should, at minimum, implement no-excuse absentee voting.

- **Enact Permanent Vote-by-Mail Lists.** In several states, registered voters can request to be added to a permanent vote-by-mail list. This reduces the burden on citizens to request an absentee ballot each election cycle. Rather, the state automatically mails a ballot to residents on this list, making the voting process easier.
- **Use Secure Drop-Boxes.** Secure drop-boxes are a great alternative to returning absentee ballots through the mail. Drop-boxes can be placed throughout a community and securely monitored by either in-person guards or through video surveillance. If allowed under state law, local election officials should install drop-boxes as a way to make voting more convenient. If necessary, state legislators should enact legislation to clarify the safety and legality of drop-boxes. Despite unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, the Associated Press found no evidence that drop boxes resulted in voter fraud or election fraud.
- **Extend Deadline of Absentee Ballots to Election Day.** Many states have confusing laws about deadlines for mail-in ballots. Some require that ballots be received by a certain time on Election Day; some require ballots to be postmarked by a certain day before the election; and still others count every ballot mailed before or on Election Day. The third option is the most voter-friendly, allowing voters to fill out and mail their ballot on Election Day. While this method could result in a longer waiting period to determine the winner of an election, it allows the most voters to participate.

State legislators should make the absentee deadline as voter-friendly as possible. No matter what method a state adopts, elected officials should be vocal about informing citizens about how and when to vote by mail to ensure their vote is counted.

- **Examine Signature Match Requirements.** Lawmakers and election officials should examine signature match requirements for absentee ballots to ensure voters are not facing discrimination. In states with a signature match requirement, lawmakers should ensure voters have ample opportunity to cure such ballots if a trained official suspects a discrepancy. Safeguards should be in place to ensure such laws are not used in a discriminatory manner, especially with regard to voters with disabilities, elderly voters, and voters with a first language other than English. Policymakers should be mindful of the ACLU finding that, **without safeguards**, signature match requirements have the potential to discriminate against voters who already face other obstacles to voting, including the elderly and voters with a disability.

- **Enact Ballot Tracking Measures.** State legislators should prioritize the enactment of ballot tracking measures for absentee ballots. According to the **Center for American Progress**, such a system “allows voters to track their ballots through every step of the process, from the moment they request a ballot to the time it is counted.” In some states, such as California, voters can receive a text message letting them know their vote has been counted. Such a measure also increases the transparency of elections.
- **Create Permissive Ballot Curing Regulations.** Sometimes, voters make simple mistakes when returning absentee ballots. Many states have ways for voters to rectify, or “cure” those ballots. For instance, some states require a copy of an ID to accompany a ballot. If a voter uses an ID not allowed under regulations, one way to “cure” the ballot would be for the voter to provide the state with an appropriate ID. State and local officials should immediately notify voters that ballots need to be “cured,” and allow ample time for voters to rectify issues so that their votes can count.



Make Election Day a Holiday. State or national lawmakers should make Election Day itself a national holiday. In this way, many citizens would have the time and opportunity to go to the polls on Election Day if they so choose. Because many service workers still work on holidays, it is important that making Election Day a holiday be in addition to – not instead of – expanded early voting and absentee voting. And, according to the **American Bar Association**, the idea of making Election Day a holiday has overwhelming public support, with 66 percent of people supporting it and only 27 percent opposing it, according to a 2022 survey.

PART III:

C I V I C

ENGAGEMENT



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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A healthy democracy is about more than voting. In fact, voting is just one part of being an engaged member of a community. From volunteering to participating in public forums, a vibrant democracy seeks to welcome and learn from citizens and residents alike.

Enacting policies provides one way for elected leaders to encourage more participation. But others include modeling positive behavior and intentionally seeking out voices on key issues.

The ubiquitousness of social media means that not only is political opinion becoming more polarized, but it is harder for both young people and adults to identify fact versus fiction when it comes to online sources of news. As a result, it is harder for Americans to make informed decisions about issues, candidates, and the nature of democracy itself.

On the other hand civic engagement – including engagement with and from the business community – can bring people together in ways that were impossible decades ago. The ease and accessibility of platforms like Zoom means increased access to public forums such as city council and school board meetings.

But as Abby Kiesa, deputy director of CIRCLE, said at a NewDEAL Forum Democracy Working Group meeting, “civic engagement is a learned behavior.” She went on to say that elected leaders must think deliberately about how to engage community residents, especially when it comes to ensuring equitable access to civic forums.

In this section, we will explore two key issues:

★ **Fostering civic engagement**

★ **Business & civic engagement**

FOSTERING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

“Fostering civic engagement is key to a healthy democracy,” state Sen. Sarah McBride (D-DE), a NewDEAL Leader, said at a November Democracy Working Group meeting. Elected leaders must approach civic engagement deliberately. Here are some ways to foster more – and more representative – engagement:



Consistently Engage with Young People. In most localities, engagement, especially with young people, is ad hoc. Elected officials may reach out to young people in the months leading up to an election, but not at other times. Governors, state legislators, and local leaders should regularly meet with, engage, and listen to young people.



Use An Equity Lens. Opportunities for civic engagement are not equal for all people. Depending on where a person lives, their economic situation, or accessibility issues, some individuals can more easily become involved in civic engagement activities. Elected leaders at all levels must intentionally seek out opportunities to make civic engagement more equitable.

It is especially important to reach out to communities that may not be used to engaging on civic issues. It is the responsibility of local elected leaders to ensure every voice has an opportunity to be heard.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many state and local leaders used technology, such as Zoom, to engage constituents. Such tools can continue to be utilized, especially to reach individuals and communities who may not be able to physically attend meetings or gatherings.



Create Concrete Opportunities. State legislators can ensure schools support participation in civic activities.

SPOTLIGHT | DELAWARE

In 2021, Delaware enacted HB 175, which “allows one excused absence per school year for students grades 6 through 12 to attend civic engagements such as visits to the United States Capitol, Legislative Hall, and sites of political and cultural significance, or participation in a rally, march, protest, or walkout.” With this law, students are not penalized for participating in democratic or civic activities.



Engage with People Where They Are. Meet people where they are, whether that means schools, workplaces, or community centers on the weekend. Further, there should be a special effort to create a culture that welcomes and supports underrepresented individuals and communities, including young people. And it is key to treat both policy issues and lived experience as entry points for further engagement.



Strengthen State Service Commissions. Each state has a Service Commission that works with civic programs such as AmeriCorps, CityYear, and Teach for America. While some funding comes from the federal government, state legislators have the opportunity to strengthen, expand, and further fund these types of programs.

SPOTLIGHT | NEW HAMPSHIRE

In 2019, Rep. Matthew Wilhelm, a NewDEAL Leader in the New Hampshire legislature, **spearheaded** legislation creating the Service Year Workforce Commission to focus on expanding national service opportunities in the state, as well as encourage program volunteers to remain in New Hampshire once their program ends.



Strengthen Digital Literacy. As access to information becomes easier, so does access to misinformation. And misinformation, combined with outright lies from unscrupulous actors, can have drastic consequences. Digital literacy is critical to help ensure the next generation can separate truth from lies online.

SPOTLIGHT | DELAWARE

Following the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, state Sen. Sarah McBride, a NewDEAL Leader, introduced one of the most comprehensive digital citizenship education bills in the nation. After looking at best practices from states across the country, McBride crafted a bill to require the Department of Education to develop and maintain evidence-based, age-appropriate media literacy standards for public and charter K-12 schools. In addition to teaching children about responsible and healthy online behavior, the bill aims to help students identify fact versus fiction online. Her bill, **SB 195**, passed both legislative chambers and was signed into law.



Recruit Youth Poll Workers. During midterm and presidential election years, roughly half a million people serve as poll workers across the nation.

According to **CIRCLE**, only nine percent of poll workers are under the age of 25, and only three percent are under age 18 (all but six states allow individuals under the age of 18 to work as poll workers). Local elected officials should seek out partnerships with youth organizations – including high schools and colleges – to recruit poll workers.

SPOTLIGHT | MINNEAPOLIS, MN

In 2020 and 2021, **CIRCLE** partnered with groups in Minneapolis, MN, to study the impact of young people serving as election judges (the term used in Minnesota for poll workers). According to their research, 97 percent of youth who participated said that voting was an important part of civic life. Further, two-thirds of participants said the experience made them feel like they were making things better for their community, and a majority said the experience made them feel a strong sense of belonging to their community. CIRCLE recommends that local officials – from mayors to city councilmembers to election officials – intentionally partner with schools, and ensure that they reach out to a diverse population including schools with a large percentage of students of color. “The more Election Administrators reach out to and build partnerships with schools, the more youth will be introduced to and potentially join their programs,” states the study.

INCREASING THE ROLE OF BUSINESSES & CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS

WITH SUPPORT FROM THE LEADERSHIP NOW PROJECT

Businesses have an economic self-interest in a stable, healthy democracy. “Volatility, including contested elections and violent protests, put businesses at risk,” states the **Leadership Now Project**, a business organization focused on healthy democracies. As such, businesses have a responsibility to help build and sustain an active citizenry committed to civic engagement.



Educate Residents. Businesses and civic organizations have ample opportunities to educate residents about elections and the election process. Businesses can post important election information in break rooms so employees know when, where, and how to vote. Where it is permissible by law, businesses can provide voter registration forms to all customers who enter their store. There are plenty of creative ways to civically engage residents.



Actively Oppose Voter Suppression. While public trust in the media and politicians is relatively low, businesses are still a trusted source, according to the **Leadership Now Project**. According to their survey, 54 percent of Americans trust businesses, compared to only 42 percent who trust the government and 45 percent who trust the media. Business leaders have the authority and motive to speak out in favor of a healthy, robust democracy.

In addition to voter suppression, businesses and civic organizations can push back against misinformation broadly. Leaders in the civic and business world can point residents and the media to quality sources of information, such as official state websites that lay out correct information about how, when, and where citizens can vote. Many civic organizations are **working with state-level officials**, such as the Secretary of State, to share verified information and combat misinformation.



Create Civic Engagement/Community Service Days. In order to foster strong communities, business leaders should partner with local, state, or national nonprofits for community service days and/or opportunities for civic engagement. Community service days can range from park or river clean-ups to helping out at a local community food bank. Civic engagement could include volunteering the business location as host for a town hall with local and/or state officials.



Provide Paid Time Off for Employees to Be Poll Workers. Business leaders should partner with local election officials to provide incentives for poll workers. The Leadership Now Project recommends giving workers paid time off to work at the polls as well as to vote.

SPOTLIGHT | OLD NAVY

In the 2020 election, Old Navy led the way in providing incentives for employees to both vote and to work at election sites. According to the [Leadership Now Project](#), Old Navy offered three hours of paid time off to any employee who wanted to vote, as well as eight hours of paid time off for any employee who wanted to volunteer at the polls.



Engage with the Faith Community. Volunteers are the backbone of many elections. And faith communities often have a desire to give back to their communities. Faith leaders can reach out to election officials about ways that members can become involved in election volunteering opportunities.



Educate Poll Observers. In the same way that misinformation can negatively impact voters, poll observers may have a negative experience if they are not aware of their rights and responsibilities. In Philadelphia, the [Committee of Seventy](#), a nonpartisan, independent good government organization has a program to train and educate election observers. Local election officials can and should partner with like minded groups to educate observers about their role. Such relationships are beneficial to the election process, and potentially remove obstacles to conducting elections.



Actively Encourage Employees to Register to Vote. One of the simplest ways to encourage voting among employees is to host a voter registration drive at a business. This could include nonpartisan resources in company newsletters as well as partnering with a nonpartisan group to visit a business location for a voter registration drive.



DEMOCRACY
WORKING GROUP

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ABOUT THE NEWDEAL FORUM

The NewDEAL Forum is a Washington-DC based non-profit organization which identifies and promotes innovative, future-oriented state and local pro-growth progressive policies that can improve the lives of all Americans. By facilitating the identification and spread of policy ideas, the NewDEAL Forum seeks to foster economic growth, reduce barriers to opportunity, and promote good government in communities throughout the country.

Its sister organization, **the NewDEAL**, supports a network of about 200 state and local officials -- statewide officials, legislators, mayors, council members, and other local leaders across the country -- who are pro-growth progressives. The organization brings together leaders focused on expanding opportunity, helping them develop and spread innovative ideas to spur economic growth that is broadly-earned and sustainable.