International IDEA THE CARTER CENTER

Q&A

Electoral processes ahead of the 2026 U.S. midterm election

How does the U.S. election administration system compare internationally?

International IDEA's Credible Elections index shows that U.S. elections perform strongly overall. However, long-standing concerns include the influence of loosely-regulated money in politics, a lack of competitiveness in many Congressional races, and rising threats of violence against election workers and local officials.

The U.S. election administration system is unusually decentralized. According to the Constitution, States determine the "time, place, and manner" of elections, with administration at the county or township level across 10,000+ jurisdictions.

By comparison, most countries operate under unified rules coordinated by a centralized election management body. Some federal minimum standards do apply in the United States, such as those established by the Voting Rights Act, and states and county election officials are increasingly cooperating and sharing best practices. Decentralization brings resilience against system-wide disruption, but also a patchwork of rules.

The MIT Election Lab ranks the election performance of each state. For an overview of global practices, see Electoral Management Design Database | International IDEA.

For international standards on election administration, see Model Commitments for Credible Elections.

Why are elections run differently from state to state?

The Constitutional division of power between states and the federal government has long served as an important check on partisan influence in the election administration process. This decentralization also serves as a safeguard against malign influence and cybersecurity threats.

See Election Labs MIT for more information on Voter ID requirements in the United States, NCSL on voter list maintenance in the United States, and the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network site for global practice.

Voter identification and citizen verification: how does the United States compare globally?

Globally, voter rolls may be drawn from population or residency registers, or compiled through a nationally coordinated registration process led by the election authority. In the United States, voters generally need to register actively, making the removal of barriers to registration particularly important. In the United States, voter identification requirements vary widely by state.

What are in-person and postal voting options across the United States?

Most in-person voting in the United States uses hand-marked paper ballots or voting machines that produce a paper ballot or a voter-verifiable paper record. Many states offer early in-person voting or postal voting options.

Some states, like Colorado, send mail ballots by default to all registered voters. International IDEA's comparative data indicates that the integrity measures used for postal voting, such as ballot tracking, signature verification, multiple envelopes and observer access, surpass those in many countries.

The practice of "curing" in the United States lets voters correct errors such as a missed signature, thus avoiding invalidation of those ballots.

For information on voting options globally, see Special Voting Arrangements | International IDEA.
For information on U.S. voting practices, see U.S. Election Assistance Commission Report.

What pressures could election officials and voters face in 2026?

- Administration: unevenly resourced and supported
- Security and safety: online harassment, incivility of discourse, intimidation of election officials or voters
- Legal disputes: redistricting, voter rolls, federal vs. state roles, or last-minute changes to the process
- Trust: misleading claims about procedures, counting, non-citizen voting, fraud and certification, AI-generated misleading content, money-in-politics and campaign tactics

See Review of the 2024 Super-Cycle Year of Elections: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities | International IDEA, and Review of the 2025 Elections.

What are appropriate timeframes and mechanisms for introducing changes to electoral processes?

International standards, including the Council of Europe's "one-year principle", say major reforms should come well before elections.
On 31 March 2026, President Trump issued an executive order for measures on citizenship verification, voter lists, mail-in ballots, and the role of the U.S. Postal Service. States and voting-rights groups filed lawsuits arguing executive overreach; a federal court blocked the USPS rules for the midterms on 27 August, and the Supreme Court denied the administration's emergency request to lift the injunction.

See Principles for Electoral Reform.

What mechanisms ensure a safe election for voters?

International guidance says security should be neutral, proportionate and politically independent. Concern has grown that ICE or the National Guard could appear near election sites and deter voters. However, U.S. laws criminalize voter intimidation, and it is a felony for federal civil, military, or naval personnel to bring “troops or armed men” to election sites.

Transparency is also an important safeguard. Election observation, ballot-tracking measures, verification procedures and post-election audits give voters ways to see and check how the process works rather than simply being asked to trust it.

See Election Standards and Obligations The Carter Center.

For more information, or interviews with our experts, consult Media resources | International IDEA or The Carter Center Press Room

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