



C.L.E.A.N. Up The M.E.S.S. (Make Elections Secure In States)

A Citizen's Guide To Restoring Trust In Our Elections

I. Introduction

In March 2025, President Donald J. Trump issued a landmark Executive Order titled “Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections,” urging federal and state governments to work together to restore public trust in our electoral process.¹ In support of this vision, U.S. Representative Pete Sessions (R-TX) drafted the MESA (“Making Elections Secure and Accurate”) Act, a proposed legislative framework aimed at helping states standardize and secure their election procedures.²

While the Executive Order sets national direction, its effectiveness ultimately depends on whether states adopt and enforce corresponding standards through state law and administrative practice. As Americans, we have a right to transparent, verifiable, and fair elections. Unfortunately, years of loopholes and disparate practices have created what Citizens Defending Freedom (CDF) identifies as a national “M.E.S.S.,” a breakdown in trust and consistency across our election systems.

In response, CDF has developed this guide as a constructive, nonpartisan pathway to help states take action.³ Our **C.L.E.A.N.** framework is a citizen-driven plan to revitalize public confidence in our elections by advancing five core measures:

- **C** — *Citizenship Verification & Voter ID*
- **L** — *Limit Mail-In Ballots*
- **E** — *Early Voting Shortened / Election Day Uniformity*
- **A** — *Accountable & Accessible Precincts*
- **N** — *No Digital Ballots or Machine Counting*

¹See Exec. Order No. 14248, 90 FR 14005, “[Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections](#)” (March 25, 2025).

²For more, see Lupo, B. (2025). [Rep. Pete Sessions to Introduce Make Elections Secure Act – Would Eliminate Voting Machines and Ensure Hand-Marked Paper Ballots – Severely Restrict Mail-in Voting](#). *The Gateway Pundit*.

³Citizens Defending Freedom is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Accordingly, this publication is intended for educational purposes only and does not support or oppose any candidate for public office or political party. References to legislation, public figures, or governmental actions are provided solely to inform citizens about issues related to election integrity and civic engagement.

In the pages to follow, we explain how this model can be adopted to empower voters, protect election outcomes, and reinforce the integrity of our system so that the foundation of our constitutional republic remains strong for years to come.

II. C.L.E.A.N. Election Standards: Why They Matter

- **C — Citizenship Verification & Voter ID**

- *Background & Examples*

- A. *Identification & Citizenship Documentation*

Although federal law prohibits noncitizens from voting in federal elections, across many states, there is no uniform requirement to prove U.S. citizenship when registering or voting.⁴ Voter registration systems often rely on self-attestation of citizenship (aka, “the honor system”), with few built-in safeguards to prevent ineligible individuals, including noncitizens, from being added to the rolls. While these structural weaknesses vary by state, they consistently render the system susceptible to unlawful participation and public distrust.

For example, in Florida, applicants need only check a box attesting to their citizenship.⁵ Florida Statutes § 97.053 only requires applicants to affirm citizenship under penalty of perjury, leaving enforcement entirely reliant on the honor system. Despite the fact that Florida’s Constitution (Article VI, Section 2) limits voting to U.S. citizens, no supporting documentation is required to prove citizenship.⁶

Other states demonstrate how this lack of verification can lead to direct access for noncitizens. In Pennsylvania, a longstanding flaw in the Department of Motor Vehicles’ (DMV) system automatically offered voter registration to individuals, regardless of citizenship status when they applied for or renewed a driver’s license.⁷ Unless the applicant proactively opted out, they could be added to the voter rolls even if they were ineligible. This vulnerability remained in place until it was formally addressed in 2017.⁸

⁴See [18 USC 611: Voting by aliens](#).

⁵For more, see [Florida Statutes § 97.053](#) (2024), which governs voter registration and requires applicants to affirm U.S. citizenship, but does not require documentary proof. See, in particular, (5)(a)(4) stating, “A voter registration application is complete if it contains the following information necessary to establish the applicant’s eligibility pursuant to s. 97.041, **including: A mark in the checkbox affirming that the applicant is a citizen of the United States.**”

⁶For more, see [Florida Constitution, Article VI, Section 2](#) (last amended in 2020).

⁷See Moselle, A. (2017). [Pennsylvania changing ‘Motor Voter’ to keep noncitizens from registering to vote](#). *WHYY*.

⁸Pennsylvania General Assembly. (2017). [Joint State Government Commission Senate Hearing Transcript](#).

B. *Flaws of Automatic Registration*

In some cases, overbroad statutory language and permissive administrative policies have opened the door to unlawful registration on an even wider scale.⁹ Take Alaska, where Ballot Measure 1 (2016) created the Permanent Fund Dividend Automatic Voter Registration (PFD AVR) program, which automatically registers or updates voter information for PFD applicants unless they opt out.¹⁰ However, the PFD application does not require proof of U.S. citizenship, which means that noncitizens could hypothetically receive state voter ID cards to cast ballots.¹¹

○ *Proposed Solutions*

Therefore, to meaningfully address this problem and restore public confidence in our elections, states should implement the following:

✓ **Every voter should present valid, government-issued photo identification at the polls.**

Examples of acceptable forms of ID would include any state-issued identification card, such as:

- State-issued driver's license
- U.S. military identification card
- U.S. passport
- State-issued non-driver ID card
- Tribal identification issued by a federally recognized tribe

Examples of unacceptable forms of ID include:

- Student ID cards issued by colleges or universities
- Neighborhood association or club membership cards
- Credit or debit cards with a photo
- Library cards or employee badges

⁹This resource is intended for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. The information contained herein should not be relied upon as a substitute for legal counsel.

¹⁰State of Alaska Division of Elections. [Permanent Fund Dividend Automatic Voter Registration \(PFD AVR\)](#).

¹¹For more, see Downing, S. (2024). [Alaska election integrity loophole lets non-citizens get a state voter ID card, and even vote in elections](#). *Must Read Alaska*. Notably, the Alaska Division of Elections acknowledges the possibility that non-U.S. citizens may inadvertently receive a voter registration card. According to its website, individuals who are not U.S. citizens are instructed to contact the Division to cancel their registration, effectively relying on self-reporting and voluntary compliance to correct the error.

These forms of identification are unacceptable for use at the polling place because they are not issued to verify voter eligibility. While they may display a name or photograph, they are not designed to confirm legal status or citizenship and therefore cannot function as reliable voter identification on their own. When used in conjunction with documentary citizenship verification at voter registration, government-issued photo identification at the polls serves the distinct and necessary purpose of confirming voter identity at the time of voting.

✓ **Citizenship Documentation for New Voter Registration**

Because not all government-issued identification documents affirmatively establish United States citizenship, states should require documentary proof of citizenship at the time of initial voter registration for new registrants only.

Acceptable forms of citizenship documentation for new voter registration should include:

- A valid United States passport or passport card
- A certified birth certificate issued by a state, territory, or possession of the United States
- A certificate of naturalization or certificate of citizenship issued by the United States government
- Qualifying tribal documentation issued by a federally recognized tribe that affirms U.S. citizenship
- Qualifying military documentation that affirmatively establishes U.S. citizenship

This requirement would apply only to new voter registrants and would not affect voters already registered under existing state law, unless otherwise required through lawful list-maintenance procedures.

✓ **Voters must also sign a sworn affidavit affirming U.S. citizenship under penalty of perjury.**

Requiring a sworn affidavit under penalty of perjury adds a binding layer of legal accountability to the voter registration process. Unlike a simple checkbox, it turns citizenship affirmation into an enforceable declaration, deterring fraud and enabling prosecution when violations occur.¹² This safeguard is especially critical in states that do not require

¹²See [SAVE America Act](#) (H.R. 7296, 2026), which would amend the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. This section explicitly states: “(ii) Affidavit Requirement. If a State or local official makes a determination under clause (i) that an applicant has sufficiently

documentary proof of citizenship, helping to reinforce the principle that voting is both a privilege and a responsibility reserved for U.S. citizens.

Policy Spotlight: The SAVE America Act as a Legislative Model

The Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act (the “SAVE America Act”) ([H.R. 7296, 119th Congress](#)) provides a roadmap for addressing citizen verification concerns at both the federal and state levels. Introduced in 2024, the bill would require proof of U.S. citizenship when registering to vote in federal elections and direct states to remove noncitizens from voter rolls.

While the Act is currently pending at the federal level, states do not have to wait. Many of its provisions can be adapted immediately into state law to ensure that only eligible citizens cast a ballot.

- **L — Limit Mail-In Ballots**

- *Background & Examples*

- A. *Chain-of-Custody Vulnerabilities in Mail-In Voting*

Expanding mail-in voting without strict limits introduces significant risks into the election process. Unlike in-person voting, which, ideally, should require verified ID and controlled conditions, mail-in ballots are distributed widely, rely on third-party handling, and often lack clear chain-of-custody measures.¹³ When access to mail-in voting is too broad, it increases the likelihood of ballots being sent to outdated addresses, cast fraudulently, or harvested by third parties, all without the same level of oversight or verification.¹⁴

2020 highlighted many of these detrimental possibilities. For example:

- In Nevada, more than 90,000 ballots were returned undeliverable in the primary election alone, revealing the shortcomings of relying on outdated voter rolls.¹⁵ On this, former Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt observed that, during

established U.S. citizenship ... such determination shall be accompanied by an affidavit developed under clause (iii) signed by the official swearing or affirming the applicant sufficiently established United States citizenship...”

¹³Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). (2020). [Mail-in Voting in 2020 Infrastructure Risk Assessment](#).

¹⁴Lucas, F. (2022). [7 Elections Reversed After Ballot Harvesting Scandals](#). *The Daily Signal*.

¹⁵Public Interest Legal Foundation (2021). [92K Clark County NV Mail Ballots Went to Wrong Addresses in 2020 Presidential Election](#).

this time, ballots also accumulated in unsecured locations such as apartment lobbies and trash bins.¹⁶

- In New Jersey, a mail-in ballot fraud scheme during a local election in Paterson led to criminal charges after hundreds of ballots were found bundled together and improperly handled.¹⁷
- In California, the mass mailing of ballots to all registered voters resulted in reports of ballots being sent to deceased individuals or voters no longer living at their listed addresses.¹⁸

As the examples illustrate, without tight restrictions, mail-in voting can diminish faith in election outcomes, delay results, and create openings for fraud and error, especially in jurisdictions with outdated rolls or limited ballot tracking systems.

B. Participation Impacts of Widespread Mail-In Voting

Finally, while much of the concern around mail-in voting centers on fraud and procedural integrity, it is equally important to recognize how widespread mail-in voting can contribute to unintentional disenfranchisement. When ballots are misdelivered, delayed, or left unsecured, as can be observed in the examples highlighted above, voters can lose confidence in whether their vote will ever be received or counted due to reported instances of ballots being mishandled. Therefore, mail-in voting not only compounds the chances for disqualified or uncounted votes, but may also discourage participation altogether, especially among citizens who already feel uncertain about the process. In effect, a system intended to expand access can end up deterring the very voters it claims to empower.¹⁹

For more on voter disenfranchisement, this time in the context of early voting, see [“Section E — Early Voting Shortened / Election Day Uniformity.”](#)

¹⁶Halon, Y. (2020). [Ex-Nevada AG describes ballots 'piled up in apartments and trash cans and in hallways' due to mail-in voting.](#) *Fox News*.

¹⁷Dienst, J. (2020). [Hundreds of Mail-In Votes Already Set Aside Due to Voter Fraud Claims in Paterson.](#) *NBC New York*.

¹⁸KCAL News. (2020). [Duplicates And Dead People: Hundreds Of Thousands Of Questionable Ballots Sent Out To LA County Voters.](#) *CBS News*.

¹⁹Acosta, G. (2024). [Clark County voters raise concerns over mail-in ballot confusion.](#) *3 News*.

Know the Difference: Absentee v. Mail-In Ballots

While the terms absentee and mail-in ballots are often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction when it comes to election security.

Absentee Ballots: Absentee voting is a request-based process. Voters must apply individually and provide a valid reason (e.g., military service, illness, or travel) for why they cannot vote in person. Their identity is typically verified through an application process, and the ballot is sent only after approval. The concerns of this report do not apply to traditional absentee ballots; rather, we are focused on mail-in systems that do *not* operate like absentee voting—systems that send ballots automatically without the request-and-verification steps we support.

Mail-In Ballots: In contrast, mail-in voting (sometimes called “universal vote by mail”), involves sending ballots automatically to large categories of voters, regardless of whether they request one or have a specific reason. This process increases the volume of unsupervised ballots in circulation and carries a greater risk of fraud or administrative error due to outdated rolls or lack of verification. Notably, our report evaluates mail-in voting *only* where it departs from the request-based, verification-driven model of absentee voting, which we view as a secure and appropriate method for voters who provide a legitimate reason (e.g., military service, illness, or travel) for why they cannot vote in person.

- **Note:** While states such as [Florida](#) and [Texas](#) have safeguards that are stronger than automatic mass mail-out systems, their policies still reflect a broader shift toward convenience voting rather than the traditional, need-based absentee model that better protects election integrity.

- *Proposed Solution*

To strengthen election integrity while preserving access for voters who face genuine logistical barriers, **states should limit mail-in voting to individuals covered under federal absentee voting protections for military and overseas citizens.** This group includes active-duty members of the U.S. Armed Forces, members of the Merchant Marine, their spouses and voting-age dependents, and U.S. citizens residing outside the country.

Restricting mail-in voting to this narrowly defined population would maintain access where it is truly necessary while reinforcing the security and transparency of the election process.

Restricting mail-in voting in this way would:

- ✓ Preserve voting access for military personnel and overseas citizens who often face geographic or logistical barriers that make in-person voting impractical or impossible.
- ✓ Respect the service of members of the armed forces and their families by ensuring they retain a reliable and lawful mechanism for participating in U.S. elections while stationed abroad or away from their voting jurisdiction.
- ✓ Reduce opportunities for fraud and administrative error by limiting the number of ballots circulating outside supervised polling places and narrowing the population eligible to vote remotely.
- ✓ Protect chain-of-custody integrity by allowing absentee ballots to move through established military and overseas voting systems that operate with clearer oversight than large-scale domestic mail-ballot distribution.
- ✓ Align state election practices with longstanding federal law, including the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) and the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act of 2009, which require states to provide absentee ballot access to these voters.²⁰
- ✓ Promote election transparency and public confidence by maintaining a smaller, well-defined absentee voter population subject to established legal safeguards and oversight procedures.

- **E — Early Voting Shortened/Election Day Uniformity**

- *Background & Examples*

Long early voting windows are often touted as a way to increase convenience and voter turnout, based on the assumption that more opportunities to vote will naturally lead to greater participation.²¹ While this rationale appeals to voters with demanding schedules or limited Election Day availability, recent studies have shown that early voting, when adopted without other protective measures, reduces turnout and imposes administrative burdens that may dissuade engagement.^{22;23}

²⁰See the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act ([52 U.S.C. 20301](#) et seq.; 1986.); Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment “MOVE” Act (Pub. L. No. 111-84, §§ 577-83(a); 2009).

²¹Spakovsky, H. (2017). [Early Voting Disadvantages Seem to Outweigh Benefits](#). *The Heritage Foundation*.

²²Burden, B. C., Canon, D. T., Mayer, K. R., & Moynihan, D. P. (2013). [Election laws, mobilization, and turnout: The unanticipated consequences of election reform](#). *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(1), 95-109.

²³Morin, R. (2013). [Study: Early voting associated with lower turnout](#). *Pew Research Center*.

Casting ballots too early is also complicated by the reality of fast-moving primaries or shifting news cycles, which can lead to uninformed or effectively wasted votes.²⁴ A striking example occurred during the 2016 presidential primaries, when then-Senator Marco Rubio dropped out of the race a week before the Arizona primary, but more than 70,000 voters had already cast ballots for him.²⁵ Rubio's premature supporters had no chance to recast their votes, effectively nullifying their voice in the race. Candidate John Kasich lost that race by just over 6,000 votes, prompting one CNN analyst to remark that Kasich was defeated by "Rubio's ghost."²⁶

Furthermore, each additional day provided for voting ultimately expands the window in which ballots can be intercepted, lost, or mishandled, multiplying the number of touchpoints in the system that must be monitored, secured, and audited.²⁷ Many of the most egregious instances of ballot trafficking and absentee abuse have taken place over extended voting periods that gave perpetrators time to plan, forge documents, and manipulate the system.

For example:

- In Philadelphia, former Democratic Congressman Ozzie Myers orchestrated a multi-year ballot-stuffing scheme by bribing election officials to fraudulently add votes over several cycles, an operation that depended on drawn-out election timelines and lax oversight.²⁸
- In Arizona and Texas, in 2020 and 2018 respectively, political operatives led coordinated absentee ballot trafficking efforts during extended early voting windows, illegally collecting and submitting ballots to sway local elections, schemes that required both time and weak security mechanisms to succeed.²⁹

²⁴Gronke, P. (2016). [How does early voting affect presidential primaries?](#) *Elections & Voting Information Center of Reed College*.

²⁵Spakovsky, H. (2017). [Early Voting Disadvantages Seem to Outweigh Benefits](#). *The Heritage Foundation*.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Lucas, F. (2020). [15 Election Results That Were Thrown Out Because of Fraudulent Mail-In Ballots](#). *The Daily Signal*.

²⁸Aldrich, K.S. & Spakovsky, H. (2022). [Latest Election Fraud Cases Underscore Importance of Election Integrity](#). *The Daily Signal*.

²⁹Ibid. See also Office of Attorney General Kris Mayes. (2022). [Guillermina Fuentes Enters Guilty Plea in Yuma County Ballot Harvesting Case](#).

Moreover, expanded voting opportunities have also been found to increase the complexity of maintaining uniform procedures, training volunteers, and safeguarding chain-of-custody standards across multiple sites and timeframes.³⁰ The more days ballots are being cast, the greater the opportunity for administrative error, ballot mishandling, and fraud, particularly in places already struggling with outdated voter rolls, insufficient staffing, or weak chain-of-custody procedures.³¹

Beyond this, extended early voting also weakens the principle of Election Day uniformity, the long-standing expectation that all Americans vote and have their votes counted within the same defined timeframe.³² When voting is spread out over weeks, it fractures the shared civic experience of a single election day, increases opportunities for error or manipulation, and contributes to delayed results and public uncertainty. For these reasons, early voting must be narrowly tailored to preserve both logistical integrity and public confidence in the electoral process.

- In Illinois, for instance, a state law is the subject of legal concern that otherwise has allowed for vote-by-mail ballots to be counted up to 14 days after Election Day, a direct conflict with the federally defined election timeline.³³ In *Bost v. Illinois State Board of Elections*, decided by the U.S. Supreme Court on January 14, 2026, candidate plaintiffs challenged the Illinois law, arguing that counting ballots received after Election Day conflicts with federal statutes (2 U.S.C. § 7 and 3 U.S.C. § 1) establishing a uniform national Election Day for federal offices. The Court held that the candidates had standing to sue, recognizing that rules governing the counting of votes can directly and uniquely affect candidates by altering vote totals, election outcomes, or campaign burdens.³⁴
- A similar challenge is at the heart of *Watson v. Republican National Committee*, which contests Mississippi's five-day post-Election Day ballot receipt window. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to

³⁰Fortier, J. (2006). [Absentee and Early Voting: Trends, Promises, and Perils](#). *American Enterprise Institute*.

³¹*Ibid* at 51, "The Pitfalls of Absentee and Early Voting."

³²Burden, B. C., Canon, D. T., Mayer, K. R., & Moynihan, D. P. (2013). [Election laws, mobilization, and turnout: The unanticipated consequences of election reform](#). *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(1), 95-109.

³³Under federal law, specifically [2 U.S.C. § 7](#) and [3 U.S.C. § 1](#), Election Day for federal races is fixed as the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Therefore, when a state like Illinois allows mail-in ballots to be received and counted up to 14 days after that date, it effectively overrides the federal definition of when votes are cast and counted, creating a tension between state procedures and Congress's mandate for a uniform national Election Day.

³⁴*Bost v. Illinois State Board of Elections* (No. 24-568, 2026); [2 U.S. Code § 7 - Time of election](#) (last revised 1934); [3 U.S. Code § 1 - Time of appointing electors](#) (last revised 2022). The complete docket for *Bost v. Illinois Board of Elections* is available [here](#).

hear the case and determine whether states may count ballots received after Election Day.³⁵ Like the Illinois policy, this date extension fractures the uniformity of Election Day, obscuring the distinction between when votes are cast and counted, and compromises the shared civic moment of democratic participation. Political leaders and election integrity advocates have warned that such policies dilute valid votes, foster confusion in the days following an election, and undermine the public's sense of closure and accountability in the electoral process.³⁶

Security Spotlight: Early Voting and the Risks of Disenfranchisement

As illustrated by the “Rubio’s Ghost” example invoked earlier, widespread disenfranchisement, whether through premature voting or confusing procedures, can work to erode public confidence in elections. When voters are asked to cast their ballots weeks before all relevant information is available (such as late-breaking news, debates, or candidate developments), many feel they are making uninformed choices.³⁷ This can fuel skepticism about the integrity of the electoral process and may even give rise to conspiracy theories or claims of manipulation that are unfounded.³⁸ Even if no fraud occurs, the perception of unfairness becomes harder to dispel, especially in a system where major events unfold after votes have already been cast. The result is a diminished sense of legitimacy and growing distrust in the outcome itself.

Furthermore, when citizens lose confidence that their vote is timely, meaningful, or fairly counted,³⁹ electoral engagement often declines beyond voting itself.

³⁵National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). (2025). [Supreme Court to Hear Challenge to Mail Ballot Deadlines](#). The full docket for *Watson v. Republican National Committee* (No. 24-1260) is available [here](#).

³⁶Three leading election-security organizations—the Honest Elections Project, Restoring Integrity and Trust in Elections, and the Center for Election Confidence—[filed an amicus brief](#) on July 10, 2025, urging the Supreme Court to bar the counting of mail-in ballots received after Election Day, warning that such a practice “undermines public trust in elections.” They filed the brief in *Watson v. Republican National Committee*, No. 24-1260 (2025), which concerns [Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-637](#) (2024), a statute allowing absentee ballots postmarked by Election Day to be counted if received within five business days. Petitioners Secretary of State Michael Watson and Attorney General Lynn Fitch argue that Mississippi’s plenary power to regulate federal elections encompasses this post-election window. The underlying litigation, originally filed January 26, 2024, as [Republican National Committee v. Wetzel](#), No. 24-60395 (5th Cir. 2024), and consolidated with [Libertarian Party of Mississippi v. Wetzel](#), saw the Fifth Circuit reverse the district court’s summary judgment on October 25, 2024, and the case was stayed pending certiorari after Mississippi [petitioned the Supreme Court](#) on June 6, 2025.

³⁷Spakovsky, H. (2017). [Early Voting Disadvantages Seem to Outweigh Benefits](#). *The Heritage Foundation*.

³⁸McArdle, M. (2020). [Hillary Clinton Maintains 2016 Election ‘Was Not On the Level’: ‘We Still Don’t Know What Really Happened.’](#) *National Review*.

³⁹The Trafalgar Group & The Convention of States. (2022). [Nationwide Issues Survey](#).

Activities such as reporting irregularities, serving as poll watchers, and engaging in election oversight become less common, even though these forms of participation are essential for detecting and deterring fraud, manipulation, and administrative failures that might otherwise go unnoticed or unchallenged.⁴⁰

- *Proposed solution*

To address the vulnerabilities outlined above while preserving access for voters who may face legitimate scheduling barriers, **early voting should be limited to no more than three days immediately preceding Election Day.** This modest and clearly defined window would provide necessary flexibility for those who may be unavailable on Election Day, while protecting the core principles of election security, civic participation, and public trust. A uniform, short early voting period would:

- ✓ Reduce opportunities for fraud and administrative error by shortening the timeframe in which ballots are cast and processed outside of supervised polling places.
- ✓ Preserve chain-of-custody integrity by limiting the number of days, and logistical handoffs, during which ballots must be tracked, secured, and audited.
- ✓ Improve operational consistency by easing the burden on election officials and standardizing procedures across jurisdictions.
- ✓ Encourage informed and timely voting, ensuring that ballots are cast in light of the full scope of campaign developments and down-ballot information.
- ✓ Restore civic unity by anchoring the election around a shared timeframe that emphasizes accountability, transparency, and patriotic engagement.

- **A — Accountable & Accessible Precincts**

- *Background*

- A. *The Functioning & Size of Precincts*

Large precincts, where thousands of registered voters are assigned to a single polling place, can complicate accurate vote tabulation, ballot management, and meaningful local oversight. Election-audit research and administrative guidance consistently show that the risk and impact

⁴⁰Spakovsky, H. (2022). [Poll Observers Are Essential to Honest Elections](#). *The Heritage Foundation*.; Pinger, A. (2024). [What is a Poll Watcher?](#) *America First Policy Institute*.

of miscounts increase as precinct size grows. Research conducted by scholars from MIT and Northeastern University explains why audit methodologies place greater weight on larger precincts, noting that larger precincts present “juicier targets” for an adversary and are therefore audited with higher probability.⁴¹ The authors further observe that wide disparities in precinct size complicate auditing and suggest that dividing large precincts into smaller, standardized units can improve audit efficiency and reliability.

Consistent with this reasoning, a National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) technical report on election audits likewise observed that large precincts are more attractive targets for malicious actors because they contain more votes, concluding that attackers will preferentially target precincts above a certain size.⁴²

For this reason, technical audit methods weight larger precincts more heavily, and several states have established caps of roughly 1,200–1,500 registered voters as the upper limit for a manageable Election Day load.⁴³ For example, Ohio’s election administration guidance limits

Policy Note: Countywide Vote Centers

Approximately [21 states](#) currently allow countywide vote centers, which permit voters to cast ballots at any location within a county rather than at an assigned precinct. While intended to increase convenience, this model relies heavily on centralized electronic poll book systems and undermines the precinct-level accountability necessary for transparent reconciliation and oversight.

Because the reforms outlined in A — Accountable & Accessible Precincts depend on clearly defined precinct assignments and auditable records, jurisdictions that allow vote centers should address this structure as a first step toward restoring accountable precinct operations.

Recommended transition steps include:

- Restore assigned precinct voting on Election Day.
- Limit vote centers to early voting only as an interim step toward full repeal.
- Pilot paper poll book check-in models in willing jurisdictions.
- Pursue repeal of vote center enabling statutes through state legislative channels.

⁴¹Aslam, J. A., Popa, R. A., & Rivest, R. L. (2008). [On Auditing Elections When Precincts Have Different Sizes](#).

⁴²Lobdill, J. (2006). [Considering Vote Count Distribution in Designing Election Audits](#).

⁴³Other examples can be witnessed in West Virginia (see [W. Va. Code § 3-1-5](#)) and Washington State ([RCW 29A.16.040](#)), which both cap precinct limits to 1500.

precincts to approximately 1,400 registered voters, based on equipment capacity, staffing, and facility constraints.⁴⁴ This cap reflects an administrative determination that precincts above this size are harder to manage and oversee, while smaller precincts support more reliable operations and effective observation.

B. Precinct Size & Surveillance: Management & Oversight

What's more, as precincts grow too large, meaningful observation becomes impractical. Poll watchers and election officials struggle to monitor every station or process. As a result, irregularities, whether due to oversight or misconduct, can go undetected. Smaller precincts are easier to manage and significantly easier to oversee, enabling more effective monitoring and accountability.

The choice of check-in technology further affects precinct accountability. While electronic poll books can expedite check-in, they introduce vulnerabilities, ranging from software glitches to connectivity failures.⁴⁵ Supplementing or replacing e-poll books with traditional paper poll books ensures that voter rolls remain accessible during system outages and provides a durable audit trail that strengthens transparency and public trust. Clear communication of precinct procedures, incident logs, and real-time operational metrics further enhances accountability.

Effective precinct oversight also depends on stable and finalized voter rolls prior to Election Day, ensuring that poll books accurately reflect eligible voters assigned to each precinct.

C. Precinct Size, Overcrowding, & Disenfranchisement

Another reason to curb precinct size may be attributed to long lines, overcrowding, and confusion, all of which can functionally disenfranchise voters. These problems are most common in oversized precincts where insufficient machines, ballots, or trained staff turn a simple civic duty into a multi-hour ordeal. In such cases, the issue is not voter suppression by law, but administrative failure caused by inadequate precinct structure.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Ohio Secretary of State. 2025. [Election official manual: Chapter 6- Precincts, polling locations, and precinct election officials](#).

⁴⁵Shanton, K.L. (2023). [Federal Guidelines, Testing, and Certification for Electronic Poll Books \(E-Poll Books\)](#). *United States Election Assistance Commission*.

⁴⁶Stewart III, C. & Ansolabehere, S. (2013). [Waiting in Line to Vote – White Paper \(Stewart, Ansolabehere\)](#). *United States Election Assistance Commission*.

D. Precinct Size & Delayed Reporting

Finally, large precincts are often among the last to report their totals, sometimes hours after the polls close. When late results shift the apparent outcome of a race, this can sow suspicion, even if no fraud has occurred.

A recent example from Georgia illustrates how administrative errors in large jurisdictions can intensify post-election controversy. In Fulton County's 2020 election, improperly signed tabulation documentation involving hundreds of thousands of ballots prompted renewed public dispute and calls for investigation, in part because the number of ballots implicated exceeded the roughly 11,800-vote margin of victory in the statewide race, though state officials maintain that the certified outcome was unaffected by this procedural lapse.⁴⁷

By contrast, smaller precincts tend to report more quickly and transparently, reducing late-night shifts, minimizing uncertainty, and strengthening public confidence in reported results.

○ *Proposed Solutions*

To foster accountability and accessibility into precinct operations, jurisdictions should adopt the following measures:

- ✓ Cap precinct registrations at 1,500 voters to ensure manageable ballot volumes, support timely, locally controlled hand counts, and reduce aggregation errors.
- ✓ Require paper poll books at every polling location, guaranteeing a fully auditable registration list and reliable fallback in the event of electronic system failures.
- ✓ Establish a reasonable pre-election voter registration cutoff (e.g., 30 days before Election Day) to allow election officials sufficient time to finalize voter rolls, prepare accurate precinct poll books, and distribute correct precinct assignments to polling locations. Stabilizing the voter list prior to Election Day reduces last-minute administrative adjustments, improves poll book accuracy, and supports reliable precinct-level reconciliation of voters checked in versus ballots cast.
- ✓ Mandate transparency protocols, including publicly accessible chain-of-custody logs, precinct performance dashboards, and

⁴⁷Center Square. (2025). [Republicans fired over 2020 election error call for federal investigation](#). *Just the News*.

standardized incident reporting, to keep voters informed and empower civic oversight.

- A “precinct performance dashboard” refers to a consolidated public reporting tool that displays basic operational information about each polling location, such as voter check-in totals, wait times, equipment status, and documented incidents. While many jurisdictions already collect this information in various internal reports, it is often dispersed across multiple records or not easily accessible to the public. Establishing a standardized dashboard format would allow election officials, observers, and citizens to monitor polling place operations more clearly and identify potential issues in real time.
- ✓ Standardize precinct procedures, from staff training and resource allocations to contingency plans, ensuring operational consistency, efficiency, and rapid response across all polling places.
- ✓ Bolster community oversight by enabling bipartisan observation, allowing only certified poll watchers to conduct structured precinct walkthroughs and review precinct-level procedures and records in accordance with state law.

Cost Consideration: Smaller Precincts & Simpler Systems

Transitioning to smaller precincts and restoring paper-based check-in systems may involve initial administrative costs, including updating precinct boundaries, training staff, and adjusting polling locations. However, over time, jurisdictions may realize meaningful cost savings by reducing dependence on expensive electronic equipment, network infrastructure, and ongoing technology maintenance.

Precinct-based voting with paper poll books and simplified processes lowers the need for large numbers of electronic poll books, complex synchronization systems, specialized technical support, and recurring equipment replacement cycles. By shifting toward smaller, locally manageable precincts with fewer electronic dependencies, election systems can become both more transparent and more financially sustainable for counties and states in the long run.

- **N — No Digital Ballots or Machine Counting**

- *Background*

Public trust in the systems used to administer U.S. elections has weakened in recent years, prompting closer scrutiny around transparency and reliability in election outcomes. According to the Pew Research Center, although confidence has modestly improved since the immediate aftermath of the 2020 election, it remains below pre-2018 levels, with significant portions of the electorate continuing to question the accuracy of vote counting and election administration.⁴⁸ At the same time, skepticism in machine-based voting and tabulation systems persists. A national Rasmussen Reports survey found that nearly two-thirds of likely voters are concerned that electronic voting machines could be vulnerable to manipulation.⁴⁹

Furthermore, emerging technologies have introduced additional risks to the election environment. A national survey conducted by Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center found that more than three-quarters of U.S. adults expect abuses of artificial intelligence to affect the outcome of a presidential election, reflecting widespread consternation about AI-driven misinformation and digital manipulation.⁵⁰ Together, these findings point to a sustained decline in public confidence in election-related systems and underscore the need for policies that prioritize verifiability and public transparency.

Numerous cybersecurity experts have warned that no electronic voting system is completely secure.⁵¹ Even when disconnected from the internet, machines can be compromised through software exploits, malware, or insider access.⁵² In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recommended all U.S. elections use human-readable paper ballots to serve as the official record of the vote.⁵³ Yet in many states, voters are still required to use touchscreen machines or receive printouts encoded with barcodes, neither of which provides a direct, verifiable record of voter intent.⁵⁴

⁴⁸Pew Research Center. (2024). [Confidence in voting access and integrity and expectations for whether and when election results will be clear](#).

⁴⁹Rasmussen Reports. (2025). [Election Integrity: Many Don't Trust Electronic Voting Machines](#).

⁵⁰Elon University. (2024). [AI and Politics: 2024 Survey](#).

⁵¹Hall, Peter. (2024) [Cybersecurity experts urge retirement of touchscreen voting machines used in Pennsylvania](#). *Pennsylvania Capital Star*.

⁵²National Academies. (2018). [Securing the Vote: Protecting American Democracy](#).

⁵³National Academies. (2018). [Securing the Vote – New Report](#).

⁵⁴Appel, A., DeMillo, R., & Stark, P. (2020). [Ballot-Marking Devices Cannot Ensure the Will of the Voters](#). *Election Law Journal*.

Additionally, machine-based tabulation, whether optical scan or direct-recording, relies on software-mediated processes that cannot be independently verified by the average citizen.⁵⁵ By contrast, hand-marked ballots ensure a clear chain of custody and provide observers with a direct means of authenticating results.⁵⁶

Election security research consistently emphasizes that hand-marked paper ballots provide the most reliable record of voter intent, precisely because they allow human verification independent of software systems.⁵⁷ Ballot-marking devices and barcode-based tabulation systems can obscure the voter's actual selections and prevent voters from confirming that their choices were recorded accurately.

Conversely, hand-counted ballots, conducted at manageable precinct sizes with bipartisan oversight, can allow election results to be verified directly by citizens rather than inferred through opaque, software-generated tabulation reports where such systems are feasible and implemented with informed public support. However, hand counting must also be accompanied by appropriate safeguards, such as continuous observation, secure chain-of-custody procedures, and security cameras or similar monitoring measures, to reduce the risk of ballot tampering or unauthorized insertion during the counting process.

Proposed Solutions

To reduce vulnerabilities and restore faith in the electoral process, states should adopt the following reforms:

- ✓ Mandate hand-marked paper ballots for all voters, eliminating touchscreen ballot marking devices and digital interfaces that obscure voter intent.
- ✓ Require hand counting of ballots at the precinct level, where feasible and implemented with informed public support, with bipartisan observers present throughout the process to ensure accuracy, transparency, and public accountability.

⁵⁵National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). [Securing the Vote: Protecting American Democracy](#).

⁵⁶Appel, A., DeMillo, R., & Stark, P. (2020). [Ballot-Marking Devices Cannot Ensure the Will of the Voters](#). *Election Law Journal*.

⁵⁷ National Academies. (2018). [Securing the Vote: Protecting American Democracy](#); National Academies. (2018). [Securing the Vote – New Report](#).

- ✓ Prohibit the use of barcode-based tabulators and other machine-dependent ballot interpretation tools that prevent voters from verifying their selections.
- ✓ Implement robust chain-of-custody protocols for all paper ballots, with logs made publicly available for post-election audits.

These measures safeguard the integrity of each vote, reduce reliance on complex, software-driven systems, and empower citizens to directly verify election outcomes through observable, auditable processes.

Security Spotlight: Trust is Tangible

Public, hand-counted ballots allow voters to observe election results being produced in real time, increasing transparency and trust. Machine-based counts generally occur outside public view, leaving citizens dependent on opaque systems they cannot independently verify. Community-based hand counting restores accountability and confidence in ways automated processes cannot replicate.

III. Conclusion: A Nation Worth Securing

Election integrity is a foundational responsibility of American self-government. The C.L.E.A.N. framework provides states with a practical roadmap for adopting standards that strengthen election administration, reduce vulnerabilities, and ensure that every lawful vote is accurately counted. Together, these reforms provide a durable foundation for transparent, accountable, and verifiable elections.

About Citizens Defending Freedom

Citizens Defending Freedom (CDF) is a nonprofit educational organization that is exempt from federal taxation under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Its principal purpose is public advocacy.

Although Citizens Defending Freedom may occasionally receive designated contributions to support specific projects, it does not solicit or accept contributions designated to support or oppose candidates for public office.

CDF is an organization that provides the tools and support needed to empower citizens to defend their freedom and liberty, and place local government back into the hands of the people. We work to educate and engage citizens at the local level in order to ensure laws are followed and to bolster election security and transparency for future generations.

