



Why America's Election System is Failing - And How to Fix It

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The United States has long been thought to be one of the world's leading democracies, and U.S. officials work round the clock to export our democratic values abroad. But that proud tradition has not prevented world-class embarrassments over election snafus. Who can forget the Florida 2000 spectacle of local volunteers peering at hanging chads on outmoded punch ballots? Or the long lines and chaos that kept many Ohio citizens from registering their preferences in the 2004 election?

Many people assume that the problems we saw in 2000 and 2004 have been fixed. But glaring evidence of dysfunction emerges every election year. Ballots are discarded, poll workers are poorly trained, registration lists are not up to date, machines malfunction, and long lines discourage voters. Worst of all, obviously partisan officials change the rules to try to help their party in coming elections. Bit by bit, our country is losing its reputation for fair elections.

The United States would benefit from a new **Democracy Index** that makes our shortfalls visible for all by ranking states and localities based on how well they run their elections.

Why Elections Haven't Improved

Reform hasn't gotten traction in the United States because our elections are run locality by locality and state by state, and they are often administered by amateurs who may be partisans or volunteers recruited by parties.

- Decentralization is supposed to generate healthy competition, but local politicians usually put their efforts into making improvements voters can see, like hiring teachers or putting more cops on the beat. Although election problems occur regularly, most voters learn about them only when high-profile snafus threaten to affect the outcome of particular contests. Most of the time, citizens just assume the best. That's a mistake. It's like measuring annual rainfall by paying attention only to lightning strikes.
- Without regular, reliable performance data, citizens do not press officials to fix election problems or head them off. The result is an underfunded system for monitoring and running elections.
- Partisanship also makes healthy reforms difficult to pass. Many election officials are given their jobs because of their ties to a party currently in power. This reduces election officials' incentives to raise a ruckus when they should and creates a temptation to administer elections in ways that give an extra edge to their own party.
- Most election administrators are actually people of good faith, but as partisan appointees or volunteers recruited by the parties, many lack professional knowledge and skills. Local and even state election administrators are too often amateurs who lack the training needed to identify problems and implement solutions.

How a Democracy Index Can Help

All Americans would benefit from a new Democracy Index – a ranking of how well each state and locality runs its elections. This index would function as the rough equivalent of annual rankings of colleges and universities in the *U.S. News and World Report*. It would focus on the concrete issues that matter to all voters – How long did you spend in line? How many ballots got discarded? How well is the registration process working? The Index would also include regular, objective measures of the election process. It would help in many ways:

- A national Democracy Index, regularly updated, would tell citizens not just how well elections are working in their state and community, but how their state or locality compares to its peers. Clear, comparative information is just what voters need to identify what should be fixed, push for change, and hold officials accountable for implementing reform.
- A Democracy Index would harness the forces of localism and partisanship on behalf of reform. Election problems would be visible to voters and policymakers alike, giving politicians an incentive to do better rather than stand in the way of reform. With the Index regularly issuing new measurements and rankings, officials who drag their feet could be called out by competitors and watchdog groups.
- A Democracy Index would help officials and advocates choose which reforms to pursue, because it would highlight the states that do well, and help us figure out why. Officials in other states would be able to figure out how to get information to voters more effectively, run elections more smoothly, and count the votes more accurately. Comparative data would encourage a “race to the top” to institute reforms.
- Over time, election administrators across the country could use the Democracy Index to develop a set of professional norms about best practices without violating principles of local and state control. The people who run America’s elections and safeguard their integrity would learn what works and be able to disseminate shared information about various ways to make elections work well. America could become a world leader again.

Read more in Heather K. Gerken, *The Democracy Index: Why Our Election System is Failing and How to Fix It* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

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