



A DCI Deliberation Guide

The Future of Elections: Accessibility, Security, and Fairness

Format for Deliberation

Before the Deliberation

- I. Read this document (Required)

During the Deliberation

- I. Setting Expectations (5 min.)
- II. Getting to Know Each Other (10 min.)
- III. Election Accessibility & Security (20 min.)
- IV. Election Fairness (20 min.)
- V. Reflections (5 min.)

Background

Introduction

Public trust in American democratic institutions has reached historic lows.¹ According to a 2024 Gallup survey, only 28% of Americans say they are satisfied with how democracy is working in the United States.² At the center of this lack of faith lies elections, the most fundamental way that citizens can exercise their right to self-governance. Over the past decade, debates over who can vote, how votes are counted, who draws the maps, and whether election results are legitimate have intensified. Consequently, elections have increasingly become more of a source of political conflict rather than a mechanism for resolving political conflict.

This deliberation guide will explore three main practical and legal dimensions of this debate. The first is election accessibility: who can vote, and what, if any, structural and/or social barriers exist to shape the answer to this question? The second is election security and

integrity: what safeguards are necessary to ensure trustworthy elections without creating undue obstacles to voting? The third is election fairness: how effectively and fairly does the American electoral system translate votes into representation, and who defines what “fair” means? These dimensions of elections are inherently connected. A law that prioritizes election security may affect accessibility, and vice versa. A court ruling about gerrymandering shapes both fairness and who has political power to shape the outcome of elections.

Part 1: Election Accessibility & Security

Overview

At the core of most debates about voting rules is a single underlying tension: the challenge of simultaneously making elections accessible to as many eligible voters as possible and ensuring elections are secure enough to be trustworthy. These goals are not inherently mutually exclusive; however, legislation that affects one can create friction with the other. Strict voter identification requirements may deter certain types of fraud but burden voters who have trouble accessing required documents. Extending mail-in voting increases access for working-class and elderly voters, but it raises questions about who handles the ballots and the chain of verification. Same day registration makes it easier to vote but gives officials less time to verify eligibility.

The Legal Landscape: State Laws

The United States does not have a single federalized election code that governs election procedures such as registration and voting. Instead, states set their own rules within constitutional limits, resulting in a patchwork of laws that differ significantly. The Brennan Center for Justice tracks these laws annually, categorizing them as expansive (laws that make it easier to register and vote, such as expanding ballot accessibility to those with disabilities) and restrictive (laws that make it harder to do so, such as decreasing eligibility of mail-in votes). It also tracks interference laws, which it defines as laws that allow for partisans to interfere in the election process or threaten the people and processes making elections work, such as creating criminal penalties for election officials.³

As of May 2026, enactment of expansive laws has outpaced restrictive laws. The Brennan Center found that at least 9 states enacted 12 restrictive voting laws in the first few months of 2026, while at least 6 states enacted 16 laws that encouraged access to polls. According to data from the Brennan Center, 216 expansive laws and 123 restrictive laws have been passed

between 2021 and 2025, a nearly 2-1 ratio.⁴ Forty-one election interference laws have been passed by 18 states since 2020.⁵

Voter ID Laws

Currently, 36 states have laws that request or require voters to show some form of identification before casting a ballot.⁶ Twenty-four of these require photo ID specifically.⁷ The strictness of these laws varies considerably: some states accept a wide range of documents including utility bills or bank statements, while others require government-issued photo ID. Most provide some alternative for voters who show up without a qualifying ID, such as signing an affidavit (signing something that swears you are who you say you are) or casting a provisional ballot that is only counted after you prove your identity.

Arguments for and Against Expanding Voter ID Laws

Arguments For	Arguments Against
Voter ID Laws protect against fraud, voting multiple times, and voting by ineligible voters.	An estimated 5-19% of voters do not have valid ID for voting purposes, suggesting that these laws would block millions of people from voting. ⁸
Having requirements for eligibility maintains public faith in election integrity, which is a sign of a healthy democracy.	The Associated Press found that for the 2020 presidential election, there were fewer than 475 cases of voter fraud out of over 25 million votes cast across six battleground states. ⁹
Polling shows that voter ID laws are popular across party lines. ¹⁰ In 2025, 95% of Republicans and 71% of Democrats favored requiring voters to show government-issued ID. ¹¹	Implementing voter ID laws is costly for both governments and individuals. ID verification cost approximately \$84 million in Minnesota, and the costs of getting an acceptable ID can range from \$75-\$175 per person. ¹²

The SAVE Act

The Safeguard America Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act [currently passed by the House of Representatives and had not cleared the Senate as of September 2026] would require official documented proof of U.S. citizenship to register to vote in federal elections. Acceptable forms of identification would include a birth certificate or passport; Real IDs (federally compliant driver's licenses or state IDs that include three tiers of integrated security features) will not

count. The bill addresses some of the same citizenship verification issues as President Trump's March 2025 executive order on election integrity. Federal courts have since blocked several major provisions of the order.¹³

Proponents for the SAVE Act argue that it would eliminate almost all risk of noncitizen registering and voting. It would grant states access to national Homeland Security databases in order to confirm U.S. citizenship.¹⁴

Opponents of the SAVE Act posit that it would fundamentally change the way Americans vote. Online registration would be "upended or even eliminated," and voters would face significant barriers to use mail-in ballots.¹⁵ An estimated 12% of Americans (28.4 million people) lack ready access to a document proving citizenship.¹⁶ Additionally, over 140 million citizens do not possess a passport and 69 million women have taken their spouse's last name, creating a name mismatch that would render their birth certificates insufficient for registration.¹⁷

Registration, Early Voting, Mail-in Voting

Beyond voter ID requirements, a range of other policies can shape who can vote. Voter registration rules regarding when and how you can register and whether the government registers people automatically are some of the most consequential policies. Currently, 24 states and Washington D.C. have automatic voter registration, which enrolls eligible citizens when they interact with government agencies like the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV).¹⁸ Same day registration, available in 26 states and Washington D.C., allows voters to register in person at the polls on voting day.¹⁹ Supporters of both policies argue that they reduce administrative barriers without compromising verification of their eligibility. Opponents argue that they place an extra burden on election officials, enable turnout of less-informed voters, and give officials less time to verify registration information and prevent fraud.²⁰

Early voting and mail-in voting expand access to voters who may not have the ability to get to the polls on election day, including citizens facing physical, geographical, or scheduling constraints.²¹ States like Oregon and Washington have conducted elections almost entirely by mail for many years and have very low documented rates of voter fraud.²² Opponents raise concerns about ballot custody, confusion about deadlines, and a loss of Election Day as a shared civic moment.²³ The surge in mail-in votes for the 2020 election, combined with partisan disagreements about its security, made mail-in voting one of the most politically-charged aspects of elections in the past decade.

Perspectives on Accessibility

Americans broadly agree that elections should be both accessible and trustworthy, but they often disagree about how to balance those goals. Some prioritize removing barriers to participation, while others emphasize safeguards to protect election integrity. Others argue that states should have primary responsibility for setting election rules, or that improving the quality of voter decision-making should be the central focus. The following perspectives illustrate several competing ways of thinking about election accessibility and participation.

- Accessibility-First View: Maximizing participation is democratic in and of itself. When barriers exist, whether they are structural, financial, or administrative, legitimate voices are suppressed. Historically marginalized communities (including minority, working-class, and elderly voters) have to bear the burden of exclusionary election laws, so working to make the ballot more accessible to them is important. Democracy is strongest when the widest possible range of citizens participate.
- Integrity-First View: Ensuring that only eligible voters vote is the most important characteristic of elections that Americans should strive for. Verifying eligibility helps ensure that election outcomes reflect the ballots cast by eligible voters. Even if fraud is rare, the perception of integrity is integral to earning the public's trust in elections. Reasonable verification requirements such as identification are common in other areas of civic life and should not be considered extraordinary for voting.
- Federalist View: Each state has different demographics and administrative capacities. States should have broad authority to tailor election laws to their populations without having to worry about federal mandates. This decentralization of power will also help ensure that one mistake at the top does not compromise the entire system. States can choose how they want to balance the tensions between accessibility and integrity views expressed above.
- Epistemic View: Quality of participation, not just quantity, matters most; minimally, efforts should be made to better inform voters about their choices. A stronger position related to this view is that misinformed or low-information voters should be discouraged or even barred from participating in elections that hold consequential outcomes for the future of the country. This view is most associated today with political scientist Jason Brennan, whose 2016 book *Against Democracy* argues that most voters today are either disengaged from politics or blindly voting on party lines, and that neither group makes good political decisions. The practical policy implications range

from modest proposals like providing voter guides to more radical proposals like weighted voting based on demonstrated knowledge.²⁴

Table 1 - Accessibility and Security Scale

Guiding Question:

What is the right tradeoff between making voting easy and ensuring elections are secure?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Maximum Access	Strong Access	Moderate Access	Balanced	Moderate Security	Strong Security	Maximum Security
Extensive efforts to improve access should be pursued even if they might significantly affect security.	Moderate efforts to improve access should be prioritized even if they might somewhat affect security.	Modest efforts to improve access are preferred if they don't significantly affect security.	Access and security are roughly equal concerns; both should be maximized where possible.	Modest efforts to improve security are preferred if they don't significantly affect access.	Moderate efforts to improve security should be prioritized even if they might somewhat affect access.	Extensive efforts to improve security should be pursued even if they might significantly affect access.

Election Administration

Who runs elections matters just as much as the laws that govern them. The United States has no singular election authority. Rather, elections are administered by over 10,000 state and local jurisdictions, and each has its own rules and regulations.²⁵ This decentralized structure has advantages and disadvantages. It is harder to manipulate a nationwide election when there is no singular system to compromise.²⁶ However, it also produces significant variation in the quality and accessibility of elections from county to county.²⁷ The MIT Elections Performance Index tracks these differences across all 50 states, and it reveals substantial differences. Some jurisdictions run efficient, well-resourced operations with short wait times and high accuracy rates. Others struggle with aging equipment, understaffed offices, and long lines that disproportionately burden some communities.²⁸

A persistent and increasingly contested question is whether election officials should be partisan or nonpartisan. In many states, the Secretary of State, who oversees elections statewide, is elected on a party ticket. Other states have appointed chief election officials, who may or may not be affiliated with a political party. State and local election boards also play important roles in many jurisdictions; they may be elected or appointed and structured to be nonpartisan or to include representatives of both major political parties.

Supporters of elected, bipartisan systems argue that elected officials are accountable to voters and that bipartisan administration ensures both parties have a stake in overseeing the process. **Critics** contend that election administration should be insulated from partisan politics as much as possible, warning that officials overseeing the process may face conflicts of interest when they are also political actors.²⁹

A related question is how much authority the federal government should have over elections that are primarily administered by states and localities. Federal law establishes some requirements for federal elections, while states retain broad authority over election administration. Debates arise over how far federal standards should extend and which federal institutions have authority to impose them.

Recent actions by the federal government have brought this division of authority into sharp focus. In 2025, President Trump issued an executive order directing federal agencies to impose new requirements involving proof of citizenship, voting-system standards, federal election funding, and mail-ballot deadlines.³⁰ In 2026, a second executive order directed the U.S. Postal Service to establish nationwide requirements for mail ballots, including standardized envelopes and voter-registration information provided by states. Federal courts have blocked several of these measures, raising questions about how much authority the executive branch has to regulate elections that are primarily administered by state and local governments.³¹ Most recently, in September 2026, the Supreme Court left in place an injunction preventing the Postal Service from enforcing the new mail-ballot requirements for the 2026 election.³²

Public Trust in Election Outcomes

A major challenge facing American elections is not any specific policy or vulnerability, but the breakdown of shared confidence in their outcomes. Especially since the 2016 election, Americans have been more likely to express serious doubt about adverse electoral outcomes, and the norm of concession by losing candidates has weakened.³³ The certification process, once a routine administrative formality, has recently been a cause for concern for some voters.³⁴

These concerns became particularly evident directly following the 2020 presidential election.³⁵ In Georgia, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger faced intense pressure from then-president Donald Trump and his allies to revisit the state's election results after multiple recounts and audits confirmed the outcome. Supporters of Raffensperger's actions say that his willingness to certify results despite significant pressure demonstrates the importance of an independent election administration and strong institutional norms. Others emphasize that even independent election officials should remain subject to transparent procedures, legal challenges, audits, and democratic accountability when credible questions arise.

The tension illustrated by the Georgia case is not unique to any one state or election cycle. It reflects one set of structural choices that every democracy must make about who controls elections. The table below maps out the range of positions on three key dimensions of that tension: how authority should be divided between federal and state governments, who administers elections, and who should oversee voting and vote counting.

Table 2 - Election Administration Approaches Guiding Question: <i>Who should administer, regulate, and oversee elections?</i>			
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Election Authority A	Full federal control and standardization; one national system A1	Federal minimum standards; states control implementation A2	No federal involvement; complete state and local control A3
Election Administration B	Elected officials with direct party accountability B1	Nonpartisan staff under elected official oversight B2	Fully nonpartisan, professionally-appointed administrators B3
Election Oversight C	Political parties & candidates have broad access to observe voting and vote counting and raise challenges. C1	Partisan, nonpartisan, and public observers all have shared access to observe election processes and raise challenges. C2	Nonpartisan observers, public transparency, and professional audits provide the primary oversight of election processes. C3

Part 2: Election Fairness

Overview

Even if every eligible citizen could easily vote and every ballot were counted without problems or controversy, a democracy could still fail to represent its people fairly. The structural rules of elections shape whose voices carry weight and whose do not. Fairness as a dimension of elections is as fundamental as accessibility and security, but it is often harder to implement relevant reform.

Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering is the process of manipulating district boundaries to give an advantage to one political group over another and is one of the oldest and most persistent controversies in American politics. The practice has intensified lately, especially as sophisticated mapping software has enabled mapmakers to predict voter behavior at the precinct level with extraordinary precision.³⁶

Debates over redistricting involve two related questions: **Who should draw electoral maps, and what should be done to keep those maps fair?** Some believe elected officials should retain responsibility because redistricting is an inherently political process and legislators are accountable to voters. Others argue that allowing politicians to draw their own districts creates an unavoidable conflict of interest and that independent commissions are better suited to produce fair maps. Even among supporters of independent commissions, there is disagreement over whether fairness should be judged primarily by the process used to draw the maps or by whether the final maps produce politically neutral outcomes. The perspectives below illustrate these different ways of thinking about redistricting and partisan advantage.

Table 3 - Partisan Advantage and Redistricting Rules

Guiding Question:

Who should draw electoral maps, and how do we evaluate whether the outcome is fair?

	Partisan neutrality is not required	Partisan neutrality is required
Role of Political Authority A	Politicians who draw the maps are doing what voters elected them to do. Political gerrymandering reflects political realities and voters can respond at the ballot box. A1	Politicians drawing maps is a conflict of interest regardless of who does it. Self-serving redistricting undermines democratic accountability. A2
Role of Insulated Authority B	An independent commission that draws compact, community-based maps may still advantage one party, but that is okay as long as the maps were drawn fairly. Process legitimacy matters more than partisan outcome. B1	Only a truly independent commission with strict criteria can produce maps that are both fair in process and neutral in outcome. Both process and result must be free from partisan manipulation. B2

Campaign Finance

The role of money in U.S. elections has grown dramatically since the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* and related campaign-finance decisions.³⁷ Citing First Amendment protections for free speech, the Court ruled that the government cannot restrict political spending by corporations, unions, and other groups.³⁸ The ruling paved the way for the creation of “super PACs,” which can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money as long as they do not coordinate directly with candidates’ campaigns. Additionally, spending by “dark money” groups, which can spend heavily without having to disclose the identities of their donors to the public, has increased significantly since the *Citizens United* decision.³⁹

The 2024 election cycle was the most expensive in American history, with the presidential candidates alone spending almost \$2 billion.⁴⁰ Critics argue that this level of spending creates a system in which wealthy donors have disproportionate influence over who runs for office, which candidates compete seriously, and which policies elected officials prioritize. While some have called for a constitutional amendment overturning *Citizens United*,⁴¹ a Center for American Progress report on corporate charter reform argues that state-level corporate law changes could reduce corporate political spending without the need for such an amendment.⁴²

Defenders of the current system argue political spending is constitutionally protected speech, and that restricting it risks enabling incumbents to shield themselves from challenge. They note that money does not guarantee electoral success; in fact, there are many cases where well-funded candidates lost.⁴³ Some also argue that disclosure requirements are a less restrictive alternative to hard spending caps that would address transparency without limiting speech.⁴⁴

Arguments For and Against Stronger Campaign Finance Restrictions

Arguments For	Arguments Against
Large spending can give wealthy donors disproportionate influence over which candidates compete and which issues receive attention.	Political spending is a form of constitutionally protected free speech, and restrictions can limit political participation and shield incumbents from challengers.
“Dark money” spending can make it difficult for voters to know who is attempting to influence elections.	Spending does not guarantee electoral success; candidates with substantially more money sometimes lose.
Very high levels of spending can amplify the voices of wealthy individuals and organizations relative to those of ordinary citizens.	Disclosure requirements can address transparency concerns without directly limiting how much individuals or groups may spend.

Electoral Systems

The United States uses a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system for most elections: the candidate with the most votes wins, even without a majority. Parties that receive significant vote shares but not pluralities are not represented at all. This produces strong tendencies toward two dominant parties, a phenomenon called Duverger’s Law that is driven by voter reluctance to “waste” their vote on third party candidates they perceive as being unable to win.⁴⁵

With roughly 45% of Americans identifying as political independents paired with significant ideological diversity within both major parties, critics argue that the two-party system no longer reflects American political opinion.⁴⁶ **Several alternative election processes exist that proponents claim will produce a more representative party system:**

Single-winner ranked-choice voting (i.e., instant runoff voting): Voters rank candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives a majority of the votes, the candidate in last place is eliminated and their voters' ballots are redistributed to their second choice. This continues until one candidate has the majority.

- Proponents claim that it will reduce the spoiler effect, encourage candidates to connect with voters beyond their support base, and decrease purely negative campaigning since candidates will want to be second choice picks too.⁴⁷
- Opponents claim that it is more complex to administer and may confuse some voters, it will take longer to tabulate results, and it does not guarantee proportional representation on its own. Additionally, the American Bar Association's review finds mixed results about the effect on political polarization.⁴⁸

Open Primaries: All voters, regardless of party registration, can participate in primary elections. Variants of this system are the top-two primaries and top-four primaries, where either the two or four highest vote-getters advance to the general election, regardless of party.⁴⁹

- Proponents assert that it would increase participation from independents and cross-party voters, produce more moderate nominees, and reduce the influence of highly partisan factions that do not reflect the will of the general public.⁵⁰
- Opponents assert that it would weaken the party's ability to select their own nominees and can produce two candidates for the general election from the same party, leaving voters without a candidate from their preferred party in the general election.⁵¹

Proportional Representation: Seats in a legislature are allocated based on the percentage of votes parties receive in an election, rather than the winner-take-all model the U.S. currently uses. Most European countries use a version of proportional representation. Most require a minimum threshold (commonly 5%) to receive seats to prevent severe fragmentation.⁵² Unlike ranked choice voting, which changes how winners are selected within individual elections, proportional representation changes how seats are allocated overall, with parties receiving representation roughly in proportion to their share of the vote.

- Proponents argue it ensures that parties gain representation directly proportional to how much support they have, it gives smaller parties a viable path to representation, and it produces legislatures that more accurately reflect the viewpoints of the voting population.

- Opponents argue it can produce fragmented party systems, make governing coalitions harder to form or maintain, diminish the link between a specific representative and a geographic region, and may enable small extremist parties to gain power.

Term Limits: Rather than changing the electoral process itself, this electoral reform involves setting a limit on the number of terms an elected official can have. It is currently applied to the presidency and many governors and state legislators, but not to members of Congress. Proposals to impose congressional term limits have been debated for decades, and ever since the Supreme Court's ruling in *U.S. Term Limits v. Thornton*, it would require a constitutional amendment to change the status quo.⁵³

- Proponents argue that term limits would reduce the entrenchment of incumbent politicians by reducing their electoral advantage, and they could weaken the grip of party leaders who control the agenda of Congress and reduce the power of donor networks that support long-standing members.⁵⁴
- Opponents argue that it would remove experienced legislators who have developed policy expertise and institutional knowledge and shift power to unelected staff, lobbyists, or executive agencies that do not face term limits. They also note that voters already have the power to remove incumbents through elections.⁵⁵

The Electoral College

The Electoral College is the constitutional mechanism by which Americans elect the president. Each state receives a number of electors equal to its total congressional representation. In 48 states, electors are awarded on a winner-takes-all basis to the candidate who carries that state's popular vote. The candidate who secures 270 electoral votes wins the presidency.⁵⁶

This structure has many consequences, intended or not. Smaller states have a higher ratio of electoral votes than bigger ones – A voter in Wyoming, for example, is represented by roughly four times as many electoral votes, relative to population, as a voter in Texas.⁵⁷ Because most states lean reliably towards one party, presidential campaigns often focus their campaign efforts on a small number of competitive swing states, diminishing the power of voters in less competitive states. Another consequence: twice in the past 25 years the candidate who won the popular vote did not win the presidency because the other candidate won a majority in the Electoral College.

A 2024 Pew Research study found that 63% of Americans would prefer a system where the presidential election is decided by who wins the most votes nationally, while 35% favor keeping the Electoral College.⁵⁸ Supporters argue that the system gives less populous states more

weight than they would have under a purely population-based allocation, ensuring that candidates focus on building a geographically broad support base instead of just focusing on the most populous states.

One proposed path to a de facto popular vote system that does not require a constitutional amendment is the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact (NPVIC). Under this agreement, participating states pledge to award all their electoral votes to the presidential candidate that wins the popular vote – regardless of the outcome within their state borders.⁵⁹ The compact would only take effect once enough states have joined to collectively represent at least 270 or more electoral votes, ensuring it would not be triggered prematurely before the election results would be guaranteed. As of April 2026, 18 states and Washington D.C. have signed on, representing a total of 222 electoral votes, leaving the compact 48 votes short of the threshold.⁶⁰

Guiding Questions

Setting Expectations (5 min.)

In this section, we will review the “Expected Outcomes,” “Deliberative Dispositions,” and “Conversation Agreements” below.

Expected Outcomes of the Conversation

The purpose of this deliberation is to deepen our understanding of the arguments surrounding democratic institutions in the United States with a specific focus on election accessibility, security, and fairness. Over the course of the deliberation, we will have the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of our fellow deliberators as well as share our own experiences and beliefs about election reform. By the end of the conversation, we will have deliberated about the strongest and weakest arguments about expanding access to elections, strengthening election safeguards, and improving electoral fairness. Finally, we will have reflected on our conversation, our areas of agreement and disagreement, and what we have learned from our time together.

Deliberative Dispositions

The DCI has identified several “deliberative dispositions” as critical to the success of deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are respectful, rigorous, and rewarding. Several of the Conversation Agreements recommended below directly reflect and reinforce these dispositions, which include a commitment to egalitarianism, open mindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation, among others. A full list and description of these dispositions is available at <https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>.

Conversation Agreements

In entering into this discussion, to the best of our ability, we each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators’ stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgments
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to practice empathy
8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., “All people think this,” or “No educated people hold that view”)

Getting to Know Each Other (10 min.)

In this section, we will take less than a minute to share our names, where we are currently located (if online), and 2-3 things about ourselves that are important to us (such as our hometown, our favorite hobby, our area of study, our occupation, our gender pronouns, etc.). If you are online, we encourage you to turn on your video camera to enable a more “face-to-face” conversation. Then briefly answer one of the questions below.

1. If you could be the best at one thing in the world, what would it be?
2. What is something most people don’t know about you?
3. Who is someone you find inspiring, and why?

Election Accessibility & Security (20 min.)

In this section, we will discuss the fundamental tension at the heart of most election policy debates: how do we make voting accessible to all eligible citizens while also ensuring elections are secure and trustworthy. We will each take a minute to address the main questions below (in bold), and then together we can explore our areas of agreement and disagreement. As time allows, we can also address the additional questions below to further our discussion.

How should we make voting accessible to eligible citizens while ensuring elections are secure and trustworthy? When, if ever, do those goals come into tension? Where do you fall on the scale in Table 1? Why?

Additional Questions:

- 1) When do rules affecting access to the ballot become genuine barriers rather than reasonable requirements? How do we tell the difference, and who should have the authority to decide?
- 2) Who should set election rules, administer elections, and oversee voting and vote counting, and how insulated should elections be from partisan pressure? How should we weigh the risks of too little or too much independence?
- 3) The SAVE Act would require documented proof of citizenship (passport, birth certificate, or similar document) to register to vote in federal elections. Is this a reasonable safeguard or an unreasonable barrier? How significant are its potential benefits and burdens? Why?

Election Fairness (20 min)

In this section, we will discuss the structural rules that shape electoral outcomes in American democracy. Some are rooted in the constitutional design of the eighteenth century, while others developed much more recently. Regardless, there is disagreement about whether they serve their intended purposes and whether they systematically advantage some voices over others. This section will cover a wide range of structural questions, from how district maps should be drawn to how money should be allowed to influence elections. We will each address the main question in bold below, and then together we can explore our areas of agreement and disagreement. As time allows, we can also examine the additional questions to further our discussion.

Which features of U.S. elections raise the most important questions about fairness, if any? Gerrymandering, campaign finance, the design of our electoral systems, or something else? Why? What should we do to address these questions?

Additional Questions:

- 1) Who should draw electoral district maps and how should we evaluate whether the outcome is fair?
- 2) Which, if any, broader electoral reforms, such as ranked choice voting, proportional representation, open primaries, or term limits, is most likely to produce a more representative system?
- 3) Does money in politics distort true representation, or is political spending a form of free speech? Should state legislatures use corporate law to regulate corporate political spending?
- 4) Some people argue that the Electoral College protects smaller states and regional diversity; others argue that it gives some voters more influence than others and causes presidential campaigns to focus heavily on a small number of competitive states. Which concern do you find to be most compelling?

Reflections (5 min)

While today's conversation is an important step, creating the political community we want will take time and commitment. Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today, and then take up to 1 minute each to answer one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk.

1. What was most meaningful or valuable to you during this deliberation?
2. What did you hear that complicated your thinking?
3. Where did you find agreement?
4. What important disagreement or question remains?
5. What did you hear that gives you hope for the future of conversations about elections?
6. Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the deliberation you just had?

About This Guide

Writer: Cavan Klein '27 | **Managing Editor:** Bob Ritchie | **Executive Editor:** Graham Bullock

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The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics and organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators.

DCI Deliberation Guides

The DCI has launched this series of Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. DCI staff, faculty, and students are the authors of these guides; generative AI may be used to improve the clarity of the writing, identify errors, and provide background information, but the authors take responsibility for all final text. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathways Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

DCI Pathways Guides

For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While dialogue and deliberation are themselves important contributors to a healthy democracy, they can also lead to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative and email dcic@deliberativecitizenship.org to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathways Guides and other resources, visit www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources.

Notes

- ¹ [“Public Trust in Government: 1958-2025,”](#) Pew Research Center, December 4, 2025.
- ² [“Record Low in U.S. Satisfied With Way Democracy Is Working,”](#) Gallup.Com, January 5, 2024.
- ³ [“State Voting Laws Roundup: 2025 in Review,”](#) Brennan Center for Justice, April 23, 2026; [“Voting Laws Roundup: May 2022,”](#) Brennan Center for Justice, May 26, 2022.
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