Elections are fundamentally about everyday citizens expressing their views and participating in government. The American election system is structured around three factors that create both positive and negative pressures for change: “effective election administration,” “public trust in elections,” and the “decision to vote.”

The Democracy Fund Elections team views “effective election administration,” as a well-implemented process of voter-centric policies that balance security with access. Voter turnout and the degree to which the public trusts election outcomes are, therefore, indicators of a healthy election system – and a healthy democracy.

Since the infamous “butterfly ballot” debacle and political disputes leading up to Bush v. Gore, attention to election administration has increased. After winning a second term, President Barack Obama brought national attention to ongoing problems in election administration – specifically, problems that lead to long lines at polling places. By executive order, he created the bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration (PCEA), which in 2014 published a set of policy recommendations for improving elections. The PCEA’s recommendations enjoy bipartisan support, yet states still face significant challenges as they seek to make the election system more efficient, accessible, and inviting to all voters.
The election system is ripe for dramatic improvement through common sense reforms. However, it is uniquely prone to political gamesmanship — political actors that attempt to manipulate the rules or pressure officials to act in a partisan fashion. There are many points of leverage that avoid political gamesmanship and have bipartisan appeal. But if policy changes are either intended or perceived to influence an election outcome or otherwise shift political power, then such changes can be caught up in a cycle of political gamesmanship, resulting in changes that do not lead to more effective election processes.

Through the Election Administration & Voting map, the Elections team endeavors to better understand the system’s key dynamics and the ongoing challenges facing election officials, lawmakers, and voters. But creating a map that reflects every scenario occurring within the election system would be unreadable. So, to tell a meaningful story, we have attempted to reveal key intervention points that Democracy Fund can leverage to create positive change. Our analysis of the election system and the map are based on existing academic research and numerous conversations with election officials, advocates, scholars, and other key stakeholders.

The map’s multiple factors are organized in a series of loops or subsystems. Loops are characterized by the connections made between individual factors, and reflect how the increase (+) or decrease (-) in the significance of a given factor affects other related factors.

We expect this map to evolve. It will be shaped and reshaped by ongoing election policy changes, academic research, changes in voter behavior, and our ongoing engagement with election officials, lawmakers, advocates, and grantees.

THE DEMOCRACY FUND INVITES YOU TO USE AND IMPROVE THIS MAP.

The Election Administration & Voting map is a tool that welcomes engagement by researchers, media companies, government and nonprofit agencies, funders, and others. This map is not the final statement of the election system, but rather captures our current understanding of its key dynamics. We expect this map to evolve as the system changes.

You can explore the Election Administration & Voting map and its elements at democracyfund.org/electionsmap. As you do, we hope you will provide us with comments, questions, and feedback. Please contact us at electionsmap@democracyfund.org to share your feedback or related resources for the map.