Elections are about everyday citizens expressing their views and shaping their government. Effective election administration, high public trust in elections, and high levels of voter engagement are signs of a healthy election system and a healthy democracy. By “effective election administration,” we are referring to a process that balances security with access, and embraces policies that are well-implemented and voter-centric.

Election administration in the United States is ripe for dramatic improvement through common-sense reform. However, election policy is also uniquely prone to political gamesmanship, i.e., political actors may attempt to manipulate the rules in a partisan fashion. Policy changes that are perceived to influence an election outcome or otherwise shift political power will likely perpetuate a vicious cycle of election law gamesmanship. Whether intentional or not, election law gamesmanship ultimately makes it difficult for election officials to administer effective election processes.
VOTER REGISTRATION

Two main challenges necessitate voter registration reform. First, voters might not understand or be able to easily register to vote. Second, administrators face challenges processing and maintaining accurate voter registration data.

Voter registration is the basis for all election planning. In nearly every state and jurisdiction, eligible citizens may only vote after registering. Registration can also serve as a potential barrier for those who:
- Do not understand the requirements and timing of registration,
- Do not know they are not registered,
- Do not know how or when to update their registration record, or
- Encounter administrative hurdles, e.g., not having the appropriate documents required by the state.

Under federal law, a state’s chief election official must maintain a statewide voter registration list. Registration roll accuracy is vital because election officials must determine voters’ eligibility, assign voters to precincts, and make critical decisions about the type and number of resources that are needed to serve voters, among other things. Because election planning depends so heavily on registration, inaccurate rolls can cause inefficiencies throughout the system, potentially decreasing voter confidence in election outcomes. A bad Election Day experience might even cause some people to stop voting altogether.

List maintenance is an enormous challenge for at least two reasons. First, people are more mobile than ever before and many voters do not update their address at the elections department. Second, the diverse sources of registration forms can lead to errors. Registration forms come from voters, motor vehicles departments, public service agencies, political parties, and third party registration groups. Though many states offer online voter registration, many state agencies and groups still use paper forms. So while handwritten forms offer another option for people to register, they also increase the potential for errors in the state registration rolls.
ELECTION OFFICIAL EDUCATION

As public servants, election officials must possess the technological acumen, public relations expertise, and adaptive decision-making skills essential to navigate our rapidly-changing environment. Most election officials receive regular professional training at the state and county levels. Though many are successfully implementing innovative practices, it is unclear to what extent these training programs create a culture of adaptation in election management.

Because election administration in the United States is decentralized, the availability and rigor of these training programs vary widely by state. Additionally, limited resources and regional cultural dynamics can make knowledge-sharing difficult. Although several tools offering best practices and assistance outside of state training programs exist, it is unclear if election officials effectively know about or access those resources. Furthermore, travel costs and other considerations can hinder networking opportunities for local election officials. Over time, these and other dynamics identified in our systems map can make it more difficult for election officials to maintain high-quality election planning.
ELECTION MANAGEMENT

Election management refers to the decisions and processes for planning and administering elections. Election officials take steps to ensure that Election Day runs smoothly, even in the face of ongoing challenges. Election official capacity to meet voter needs depends not only on available budget, but also on their access to new ideas from professional education and training, use of line management tools and other technology, and their ability to collect and use election data.

Many election officials grapple with budget constraints, which directly impacts their ability to successfully plan and execute voter-centric elections. Resources – financial and otherwise – affect an official’s ability to, for example, purchase reliable voting equipment or offer early voting options. With insufficient resources, voters might experience long lines or an equipment malfunction. These experiences may also cause some voters to lose confidence in the election system.
TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION

Technology captures a large amount of very useful election data that officials must know how to harness. These data have the potential to provide election officials with key insights into voter behavior and organizational processes. Because elections are subject to a high level of scrutiny, there are also opportunities for officials to use these data transparently for the public's benefit.

Election technology includes the products of for-profit voting machine vendors, as well as the digital tools created by academics and civic technologists. For many election officials, it is extremely difficult to keep up with the latest innovations. Some jurisdictions may be hindered by the cost of new equipment and some officials might find it risky to try new technologies in high salience elections. Adoption of new election technology is rapid in some respects (e.g., ePollbooks), and very slow in others (e.g., ballot on demand tools), which indicates that more information and education about these resources are required.

Importantly, adoption of new technology may impact voters' perceptions about elections. First, many Americans are already exposed to the latest technological advances in other areas of their lives and may come to expect the same from election officials. Second, voter confidence in election outcomes is influenced by the voter experience. Lack of innovation or technology that fails could have a negative downstream impact on the voter experience.

VOTING EQUIPMENT

A handful of for-profit companies build, sell, lease, and service voting equipment for the 10,000 election jurisdictions in the United States. Because elections are relatively low priority when compared to other budgetary considerations, most election jurisdictions will invariably rely on the vendor’s service contract to keep machines running for as long as possible. Reliance on these contracts, episodic purchases or upgrades to voting equipment, and the very limited marketplace for voting machines, have disincentivized major innovation among vendors.

Stories about voting machine failure, whether personal experience or not, can shake voters’ confidence in election outcomes. Continued reliance on service agreements and market stagnation increase the possibility of voting equipment failure or decertification. When reported widely, the impact of a machine malfunction in one jurisdiction can cause a negative ripple effect on the entire system.

INTEGRITY AND SECURITY

Election integrity and security are vital components of a healthy system. Election officials create and implement a wide variety of security protocols and procedures, which range from pre-logic and accuracy testing of voting equipment to the post-election canvass. These processes encompass both the physical and electronic security of election materials and data, and are put into place for at least two reasons:

1. To ensure that ballots are protected and counted to the fullest extent of the law, and
2. To maintain the privacy of qualified individuals' identifying information, to the extent that the law allows.
There are several advocacy groups focused heavily on either the voter access or election security aspects of election integrity. At the end of the day, election officials must be able to strike a balance: create procedures that maintain system integrity without compromising the rights of voters.

Real threats test the integrity of the American election system. The recent news about unauthorized, unsuccessful attempts to digitally infiltrate statewide voter registration lists have come to the fore and put confidence in our election processes at risk. And while election officials have responded quickly to reduce cybersecurity risks and prevent future attempts at hacking, the high salience nature of these stories drowns out the important work that election officials do, which potentially reduces the public’s trust in elections.

**EASE OF VOTING**

In a 2014 report, after determining that voters need more opportunities to cast a ballot, the Presidential Commission on Election Administration recommended that states expand opportunities to vote before Election Day. Early voting periods allow campaigns and advocates to bank their base early so that they can concentrate on fewer voters for Election Day. As campaigns encourage more citizens to cast ballots early, pressure builds on election officials to increase access to early voting.

Currently, 37 states and the District of Columbia allow early in-person voting, no-excuse absentee voting, or both, and three states conduct elections exclusively by mail. Although early voting can reduce the obstacles to engagement for many people, it can also negatively affect voter confidence (in-person voters tend to report higher confidence levels than those who cast their ballots early by mail). Furthermore, as more voting options are made available, the financial, time, and personnel cost of election administration increases.

**VOTER ENGAGEMENT**

The decision to vote is complex. It is affected by “individual resources” (e.g., education, income, political interest), “social resources” (e.g., civic memberships, church attendance), and the efficacy of voter mobilization by organizations. These complex dynamics, combined with notions of confidence in government, form a tight bundle of social relationships often referred to as social capital. Elections build social capital and enrich and improve civic life. Higher levels of participation can lead to higher trust in government and in others. But at the same time, Americans have become less engaged with civic associations and have less trust in government; as result, they are less likely to vote.

Making voting easier by changing laws, policies, and processes can increase voter turnout, but it’s also important for citizens to think that elections – and government – matter to their daily lives. Voters can get basic public information about elections from multiple sources. However, basic information is not designed to help voters understand why an election matters. Campaigns, advocates, and media give context to the issues or offices on a ballot. The type of election (presidential, primary, state, local) is also key to understanding interest. The perceived importance of the offices and issues up for election are colored by voter attitudes, media attention, and peer pressure, among other factors.
EDUCATION ABOUT ELECTIONS

Making the effort to cast a ballot may seem small, but for many people the personal cost of participation might be high. And while early voting has made voting more convenient, a potential voter must take time and effort to arrive at the polling place, research ballot information, stand in line, and cast the ballot. The closer the election, the more critical basic information about voting becomes. If information is hard to obtain, it is hard to get voters interested in an election.

Citizens might not engage in civic life if they believe that government is hyper-partisan, ineffective, or irrelevant. Those who have a low capacity and tolerance for political debate may ignore competing information about the candidates and issues. Additionally, campaign behavior may make disengaged citizens feel even more disconnected from government and politics. Finally, our research suggests that partisan in-fighting turns people off from participation.

BARRIERS TO VOTING

Intentional and unintentional barriers to voting can arise through legal, legislative, and administrative decision making. When critical decisions are before lawmakers, judges, or election officials, it is vital that they weigh the impact those changes could have on discrete groups of voters, especially racial and ethnic minorities who have been subjected to purposeful disenfranchisement. Changes to election and voting laws may also have negative effects on women, persons with disabilities, individuals with language-access needs, residents in rural communities, and members of the overseas and armed services communities.

Litigation is one means of defending voters from the legal and procedural changes that negatively impact voting rights. Legal challenges require courts to evaluate a complex set of facts, laws, and procedures very quickly. In some cases, these suits are settled out of court, with issues partially or wholly alleviated. Even when well intended and especially when suits are brought close to Election Day, litigation and subsequent court decisions may give election administrators little time to make the mandated adjustments and could cause confusion for voters.
ELECTION LAW GAMESMANNISHIP

Changes to election laws and procedures are often viewed as efforts to game the election system and hurt political opponents. Regardless of actual motivation, the perceived intent of gamesmanship reduces the likelihood of bipartisan cooperation, undermines much-needed modernization efforts, and stalls politically neutral best practices – making bipartisan support for election policy changes more challenging.
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.