



**AMERICAN  
DEMOCRACY**  
*at a*  
**CROSSROADS**

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*Proposals for Democratic  
Reform and Renewal*

**May 2024**

**Duke** | SANFORD SCHOOL of  
**PUBLIC POLICY**

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## Editors' Note

The proposals in this report were authored by ten graduate and undergraduate students participating in “American Democracy at a Crossroads” (PUBPOL590S), a seminar at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy, during the Spring 2024 semester.

The proposals have been edited lightly for clarity and consistency by Sanford Associate Professor of the Practice Asher D. Hildebrand and Sanford MPP '24 Anna Hallahan and are republished here with the authors’ consent. Their content does not represent the views of the editors, the Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University, or any entity or individual other than the authors.

# Foreword to the 2024 Report

By Asher D. Hildebrand, Associate Professor of the Practice

When this seminar convened for the first time in January 2022, it felt like a moment of acute peril for American democracy. The trauma of the January 6 insurrection was still fresh; state legislatures across the country were debating sweeping new voting laws; the 2022 election loomed large as the first major test of a vulnerable electoral system—and polarized electorate—in the post-Trump era.

A year later, the 2023 seminar faced a more mixed picture. The midterm elections had proved remarkably uneventful, with no violence or attempts at election subversion; the bipartisan investigation into January 6, and a swirl of legal proceedings against former President Donald Trump, offered new hope for accountability; and the outgoing Congress had been historically productive. Yet long-term democratic trends remained negative, and new battlegrounds—from the legitimacy of the U.S. Supreme Court to the content of school curricula—had emerged.

This third cohort of “American Democracy at a Crossroads” convened as the world entered a historic year for democracy, with elections being held in over 70 countries. In the United States, the 2024 presidential contest was barreling toward a rematch of 2020, despite four ongoing criminal cases against Trump and widespread public dissatisfaction with both candidates. While the threat of election subversion remained, it was also becoming clear that Trump might win the election outright—and pursue his anti-democratic agenda with a popular mandate. Against this backdrop, protests and pitched debates over free speech were roiling college campuses, while the world was beginning to reckon with the disruptive potential of artificial intelligence—for democracy and much else.



*“American Democracy at a Crossroads” Seminar Participants*

Throughout these tumultuous times, this seminar’s defining charge has remained unchanged: *“How can we defend the imperfect democracy we have against the serious threats it faces, while also rebuilding and renewing it to move it closer to perfection?”*

To answer this question, 10 Duke students—graduate and undergraduate, with diverse identities, beliefs, and lived experiences—examined three broad challenges facing American democracy today: polarization and partisanship, political inequality, and threats to voting and election integrity. The students analyzed specific problems related to each challenge, debated their potential solutions, and engaged with leading democracy scholars and practitioners.<sup>†</sup> Each student then developed one solution into a longer proposal, presented here in summary form.

This report thus represents the culmination of the seminar’s work: 10 distinct proposals for democratic reform and renewal, authored by students whose generation’s commitment to democracy will determine our future.

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<sup>†</sup> The seminar is grateful to Judith Kelley, Josh Lawson, Jedediah Britton-Purdy, John Rose, and Candis Watts Smith.

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# Expand Media Literacy Education

*Give students a broader understanding of the media ecosystem*

## A CONFUSING AND CHAOTIC MEDIA LANDSCAPE

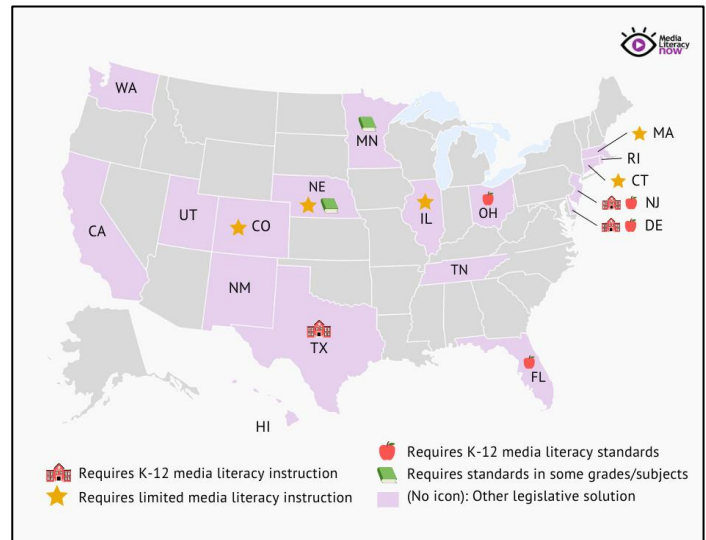
K-12 students in the United States consume a significant amount of news content: 50% of high school students reported consuming news daily through social media and messaging services in a recent survey.<sup>1</sup> However, 55% of students in another survey were “not confident” in their ability to recognize false information online.<sup>2</sup> Media literacy is critical for young people to succeed, but in a confusing and chaotic media ecosystem, it has become increasingly difficult to teach these skills.

Over the past decade, there has been renewed attention and urgency surrounding this issue. Some states have begun implementing media literacy education programs in schools. There are several prominent nonprofits as well, including the News Literacy Project and Media Literacy Now. However, many current interventions are focused exclusively on identifying misinformation. While important, media literacy education must go beyond assessing what is “true” versus “untrue.”

## MEDIA LITERACY BEYOND MISINFORMATION

Curriculum providers should expand their media literacy materials and programs to include the following:

- 1) Journalism 101:** Students should develop an in-depth understanding of news and journalism fundamentals.
- 2) Business of Media:** Students should understand the business models of media outlets and how they influence content and editorial strategy.
- 3) Politics of Media:** Students should be able to assess the political biases and agendas of news outlets.



Media Literacy Legislation by State<sup>3</sup>

After providers have developed new curricula, lawmakers should pass new media literacy education legislation at the federal and state levels. While every state’s policies will look different, at a minimum they should all include: (1) media literacy requirements for high school students, (2) media literacy standards or frameworks, (3) high quality materials, and (4) professional development for teachers and other practitioners.

## CALL TO ACTION

**Advocate** for media literacy education, either at the national level (e.g., the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act) or in your home state.

**Educate** yourself, your families, and your communities to improve our collective media literacy. A healthy democracy depends on well-informed citizens who can meaningfully contribute to civic life.

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*Thomas Cheng (MBA/MPP '25) is a graduate student at Duke University.*

# Bridge Ideological Divides on Campus

*Reduce affective polarization through increased cross-partisan dialogue*

## CAMPUSES ARE BECOMING POLITICAL ECHO CHAMBERS

College campuses across the country have become political echo chambers. With one predominant ideology becoming the norm on campus, students have limited opportunity for critical cross-party dialogue. Nearly 60% of college professors are liberal.<sup>4</sup> In addition to this, one survey at the University of North Carolina found that 68% of conservative students and 50% of moderate students reported self-censoring their views due to fears of “negative blowback.”<sup>5</sup> Difference in opinion between students is no longer respected, furthering cross-party distrust and polarization on college campuses.<sup>6</sup>

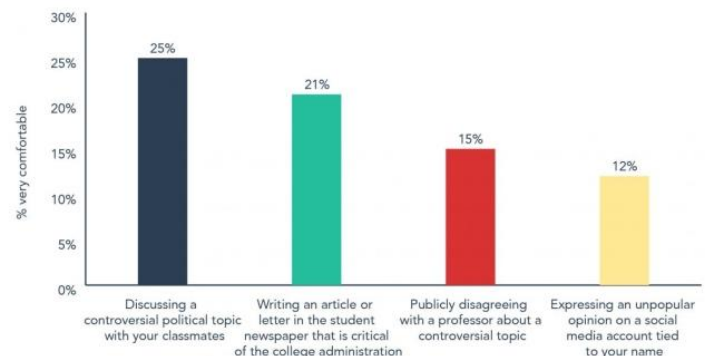
College students are not learning how to effectively communicate across party lines. The fear of negative outcomes by dissenting from the political norm on campus stymies intellectual discourse and inquiry.<sup>7</sup> The culture of fear on campuses harms students’ opportunities to learn critical communication skills that are imperative for success in an increasingly polarized world.<sup>8</sup>

## A TWO-PRONGED RESPONSE

To create greater opportunities for discourse on college campuses, all publicly funded universities should pilot a dual-pronged approach to address affective polarization.

First, universities should be required to implement a new general education course that focuses on increased cross-party communication. “Political Communication: How to Effectively Talk Across Differences” will tackle controversial political topics through seminar-style discussions. Each week, students will be required to address a political issue from a different perspective. Students will learn in the course how to approach different policy areas, understand differences of opinion, and disagree with their peers in a respectful manner.

How comfortable would you feel doing the following on your campus:



## Students Are Uncomfortable Speaking Their Minds<sup>9</sup>

Second, university administrators should implement a new office in their departments of student life or engagement: the Office of Student Organization Collaboration (OSOC). The OSOC will be responsible for facilitating and coordinating dialogue with various student organizations with differences in belief. Through the creation of cross-organization listening and discussion sections, students will have a safe and supportive space for political discourse.

## CALL TO ACTION

Students, faculty, parents, and donors are all vital parts of campus communities across universities. By vocalizing your support for increased dialogue on campus, you can help in the fight against polarization in the nation. Students: talk to your professors about the adoption of the new general education course. Faculty: encourage your student organizations to reach out to the OSOC to schedule events. Support for dialogue initiatives must start with those who are most affected by the new policies. Creating a robust student and faculty coalition around increased dialogue is the only way polarization will decrease on campus!

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*Ashlynn Lussier (MPP '25) is a graduate student at Duke University.*

# Mobilize Faith Leaders Against Violence

*Counteracting polarization and extremism with elite signaling*

## RISING EXTREMISM ON THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

Nearly one in four Americans (and one in three Republicans) believe that political violence may be justified to “save” the country,” according to one recent survey.<sup>10</sup> Support for political violence is highest among white evangelical Christians, those who support former President Donald Trump, those who believe the 2020 presidential election was stolen, and those who subscribe to “replacement theories.”<sup>11</sup> Violent political rhetoric by “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) elites signals to evangelical Christian audiences their religion is under attack and they must defend it, even through violent means, or else they will be eliminated.

According to Reuters, there have been at least 232 violent incidents fueled by political motives since the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.<sup>12</sup> Serious threats against federal prosecutors have more than doubled from 2021-2023.<sup>13</sup> In a February 2023 survey, nearly two-thirds of White evangelical Protestants qualified as sympathizers or adherents to Christian nationalism.<sup>14</sup>

## MOBILIZING CHRISTIAN ELITES AGAINST POLITICAL VIOLENCE

America cannot legislate its way out of this problem. Addressing it will require prophetic Christian leaders to challenge the Church to live up to its mission and vision. The National Council of Churches (NCC) is comprised of 37 member communions, which together is more than 35 million people in over 100,000 congregations in the United States.<sup>15</sup> The NCC should be called upon to counter-mobilize Christian leaders to lead a nationwide ecumenical movement that both denounces political violence and affirms peaceful political activism.



A Woman Baptized at the ReAwaken America Tour<sup>16</sup>

The NCC would reach out to evangelical churches seeking to build relationships and mutual understanding. They would then coordinate and mediate local community dialogue sessions for political change. Conversations may include removing national flags and hymns from sanctuaries. This movement would serve as a counter-revival to the ReAwaken America Tour, in which participants are baptized in preparation for another American Civil War.

## CALL TO ACTION

Christian leaders can counteract MAGA elite signaling of support for political violence by providing another message: one of active hope for a loving and peaceful ordering of our society for all. Leaders can inform their faith communities about the dangers of violent rhetoric and how to recognize it while engaging followers that reject political violence in favor of political activism.

Though most NCC member communions are considered “mainline” rather than “evangelical,” this does not relieve them of their responsibility to speak out against political violence in the name of Christ. The NCC is equipped and capable of this task if only it will rise to it.

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*Rev. Caitlin Ware (M. Div. '24) is a graduate student at Duke University.*

# Diversify Congressional Staff

Increase racial and ethnic representation in congressional hiring

## LACK OF DIVERSITY AMONG CONGRESSIONAL STAFF

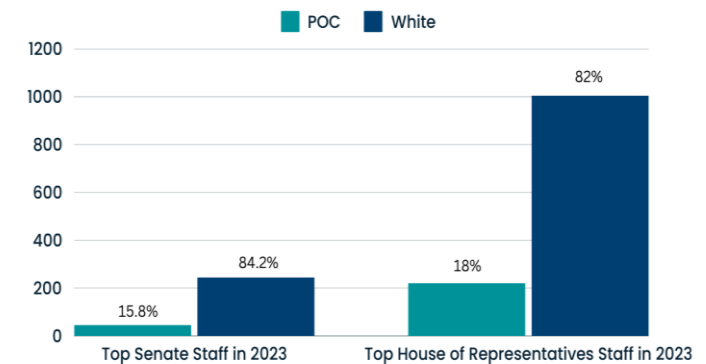
While the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress is the most racially diverse Congress in history, diversity among Congressional staffers is still lacking.<sup>17</sup> Despite people of color (POC) making up 40% of the U.S. population, only 15.8% of top Senate staff and 18% of top House staff are POC.<sup>18</sup> Top staff include all chiefs of staff, legislative directors, and communications directors in Congress.

Descriptive representation is crucial for a healthy democracy, as it enhances legislative effectiveness, facilitates advocacy for diverse constituents, and fosters consensus-building in policymaking.<sup>19</sup> However, historical, institutional, and structural barriers like low wages, unequal opportunities, and the insulated nature of Congress make it difficult for POC to become Congressional staff.<sup>20</sup>

## LEVERAGE THE OFFICE OF TALENT MANAGEMENT

The Office of Talent Management (OTM), which replaced the Office of Diversity and Inclusion in 2023, is the organizational authority in the House of Representatives with the power to diversify Congressional staff.<sup>21</sup> The OTM should build upon its predecessor's work to diversify Congress with a three-pronged approach: 1) Create a centralized resume bank; 2) Work with affinity groups within Congress; 3) Create diverse pipelines into Congress.

First, the OTM should partner with the Senate Diversity Initiative to establish a centralized resume bank where both the House and the Senate can access a diverse pool of resumes. This way, the hiring process can be centralized for both job applicants and hiring managers, creating a more diverse talent pool.



Racial Diversity among Top Staff in Congress<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, the OTM should form partnerships with affinity groups within Congress to streamline resources and opportunities. Working with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Congressional Black Caucus, and other organizations, the OTM can build upon diversity networks and consolidate resources for building a diverse staff. Lastly, the OTM should create diverse pipelines into Congress by fostering relationships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and diversity centers at colleges. The OTM can attend career fairs, host informational sessions, and conduct targeted outreach to diverse student organizations.

## CALL TO ACTION

Moving forward, the OTM should establish baseline objectives, hire and train new staff, and work closely with the Chief Administrative Officer to ensure alignment with organizational goals.

Furthermore, public pressure should continue to be placed on Congress by organizations like the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Pay Our Interns, and the public. Contact your representatives about the importance of diversifying their staff!

*Abigail Eun (Trinity '25) is an undergraduate student at Duke University.*



# Empower Female Candidates

*Dismantle financial and cultural barriers to “campaigning while female”*

## WOMEN FACE UNIQUE BARRIERS TO CAMPAIGNING

America has a problem, and it is the lack of women in elected positions within state governments. In North Carolina, women make up just 28.8% of the General Assembly, and Black women make up only 10%.<sup>23</sup> Among statewide elected executive positions, Black women are not represented.<sup>24</sup>

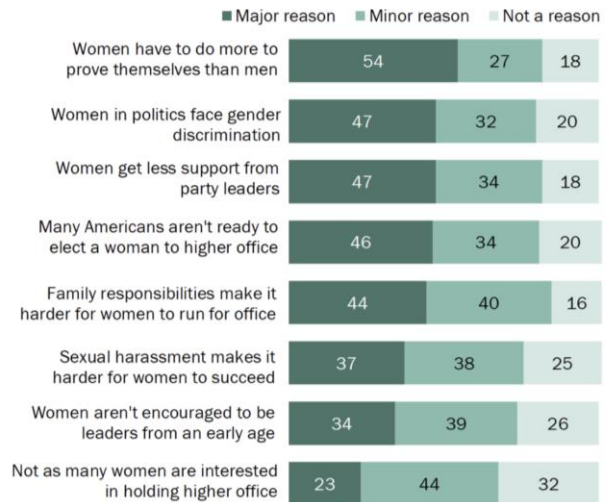
“Campaigning while female” can involve many factors that deter women from running for elected positions, including the financial burden placed on women and their families and the difficulty raising campaign donations. The above is compounded by a history and a culture of sexism, misogyny, and harassment. According to a report from the Pew Research Center, a majority of Americans believe that women must “do more to prove themselves than men... and women of color must face gendered racism compounded by gender bias and prejudice.”<sup>25</sup> Lowering these barriers should be a top priority for a more inclusive and representative democracy.

## TOWARD A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD FOR FEMALE CANDIDATES

To address this inequality, systems must be established to create successful pipelines for female candidates at the state level, by advocating for campaign finance reform.

One idea would be for all donors to contribute to a general campaign fund that will serve as a reserve for future female candidates. When applying to run for a state-level elected position, each candidate will begin with an equal amount depending on how much is in the reserve. Candidates can then apply for more funding if needed.

% saying each is a \_\_\_\_ why there are fewer women than men in high political offices



Note: Shares of respondents who didn't offer an answer are not shown.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 17-23, 2023.  
“Women and Political Leadership Ahead of the 2024 Election”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Reasons Women Do Not Run for Office<sup>26</sup>

## CALL TO ACTION

Legislation must be passed to enact campaign finance reform. More women deserve to be active participants in our government. That’s why reducing the financial barriers to “campaigning while female” is essential to ensure equal and equitable participation for women and women of color in state-level elected positions.

To help, you can call your local and state representatives to demand campaign finance reform and increased visibility and support of local women’s organizations that support women—specifically women of color—in these spaces.

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*Brittany Gabriel (MPP '24) is a graduate student at Duke University.*

# Let Nonprofits Lobby (More)

Amend federal tax law to clarify lobbying limits for 501(c)(3) organizations

## AN UNLEVEL PLAYING FIELD

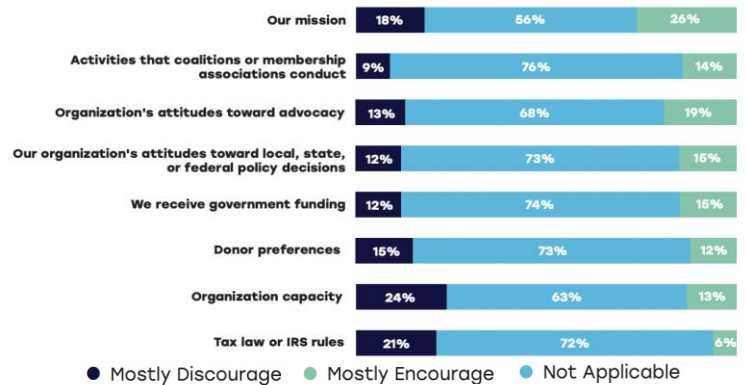
Spending on congressional lobbying reached a record breaking \$4.2 billion in 2023.<sup>27</sup> This surge is driven almost entirely by corporations, which constitute 95 of the 100 organizations with the highest lobbying expenditures.<sup>28</sup> Nonprofits account for just 2% of all lobbying activity.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the proportion of nonprofits that lobby has decreased from nearly three in four in 2002 to just one in four between 2002 and 2023.<sup>30</sup>

Corporations do not face any legal restrictions on lobbying activity. However, the Internal Revenue Code (IRC) establishes limits for nonprofit lobbying and revokes tax-exempt status for organizations that exceed them. IRC Section 501(c)(3) states that nonprofits can dedicate "no substantial part" of activities to lobbying but does not provide clear definitions or guidance on what constitutes "substantial lobbying." As a result, 44% of nonprofits cite tax law as a major barrier to lobbying, with many organizations avoiding it completely due to fears of losing tax-exempt status.<sup>31</sup>

This lopsided lobbying landscape harms democracy. First, the dominance of corporate lobbying distorts policy outcomes away from the interests of the general public and the marginalized populations that many nonprofits represent. Second, unequal distribution of political power erodes public trust, with 65% of Americans stating that lobbyists and corporations have too much political power.<sup>32</sup>

## AMEND TAX LAW TO EMPOWER NONPROFIT LOBBYING

Congress should amend the IRC to clearly define legal limits on nonprofit lobbying. Specifically, Congress should replace the vague "no substantial part" clause with an existing provision from IRC Section 501(h).



Factors that Discourage Nonprofit Lobbying<sup>33</sup>

Section 501(h) establishes a clear quantitative limit on lobbying expenditures based on a nonprofit's total financial expenditures.

Replacing the "no substantial part" test with Section 501(h) clearly defines "substantial lobbying," addressing ambiguity in current law. Section 501(h) also clarifies activities that are not considered lobbying, which is crucial for nonprofits engaged in policy-related work. Most of all, the amendment lowers the risk of losing nonprofit status by clearly outlining lobbying limits and the penalties for exceeding them. These factors will strengthen nonprofits' ability to engage in federal advocacy confidently and compliantly.

## CALL TO ACTION

**Contact** your Congressional representatives to advocate for an amendment to the Internal Revenue Code.

**Engage** with state contacts from the National Council of Nonprofits to see how you can get involved.

**Support** initiatives such as the Bright Lines Project, which convenes experts to provide recommendations on amending the IRC to enhance nonprofit lobbying.

*Natalie Wong (MPP '24) is a graduate student at Duke University.*

# Put a Polling Place on Every Campus

Increase turnout and trust by improving access for college voters

## A WAVE OF RESTRICTIONS ON COLLEGE VOTING

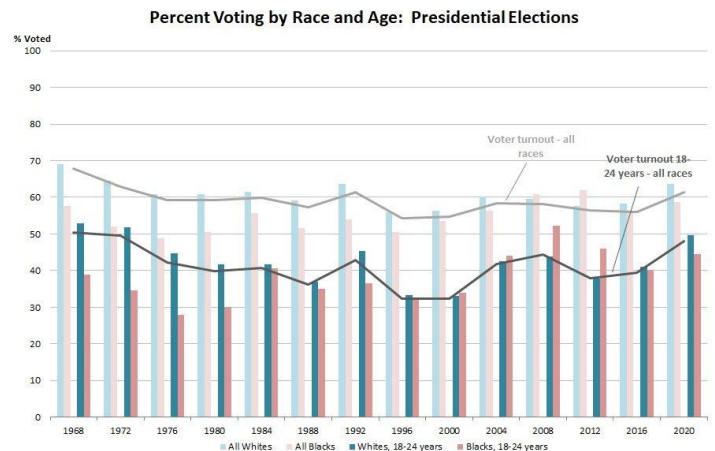
Over the past decade, states across the country have adopted new restrictions that create hurdles for college student voting.<sup>34</sup> Such restrictions include strict voter ID laws, removal of on-campus polling places, and limits on campus electoral activities. These actions, often fueled by partisan motivations, have had a particularly detrimental impact in swing states like North Carolina.<sup>35</sup>

In the 2016 election, 48% of college students voted, a rate significantly lower than the national average of 61%; in 2014, only 13% of college students ages 18–24 voted.<sup>36</sup> Voting barriers for college students have implications beyond low voter turnout. Citizens who do not civically engage are at greater risk of disillusionment and distrust; elected representatives fail to represent students' desires and such disillusionment turns to apathy regarding the American political system.

## IMPROVING ACCESS, INCREASING TURNOUT—AND TRUST

Solutions to student voting access problems should address (1) the gaps in North Carolina State Board of Elections (NCSBE) funding and (2) the lack of necessary polling in proximity to college campuses.

The N.C. General Assembly should modify Chapter 163 of Subchapter VI of its statutes to allow for the permanent designation of multiple voting places for the same precinct.<sup>37</sup> This modification would also require polling sites on campus or within half a mile of all 16 NC public colleges and universities in the state, which host almost 250,000 students. The General Assembly should also increase funding devoted to polling places and their staffing resources.



Voter Turnout by Age in Presidential Elections<sup>38</sup>

The proposal will likely increase youth voter turnout in counties with large public college or university populations. Solidifying voting habits at a young age could have the long-term impact of increasing overall voter turnout—and trust—for future generations.

## CALL TO ACTION

Students should rally on their campuses and in their communities to support candidates who run on platforms expanding youth voting access. Voter advocacy groups can work to build support for politicians who campaign on youth voter turnout.

Colleges and universities also should lobby the N.C. General Assembly to allocate more funding towards election administration. Universities should produce research papers that detail the implications of removing polling places from college campuses to sway the NCSBE to prioritize college student voting access.

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*Dena Levin (Trinity '24) is an undergraduate student at Duke University.*

# Abolish Felony Disenfranchisement

*Amend federal law to protect voting rights once they are restored*

## A LEGACY OF RACISM

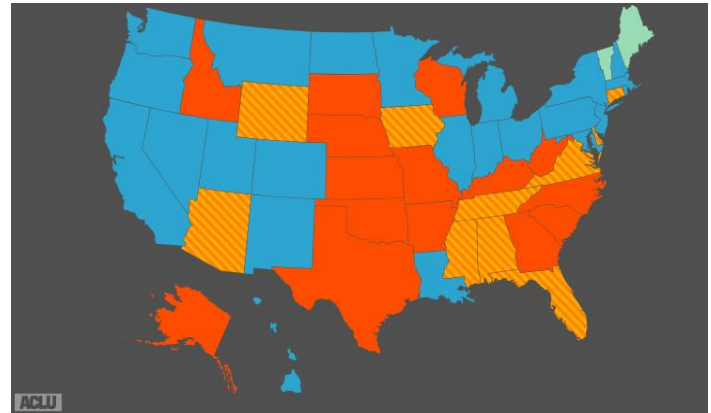
Felony disenfranchisement laws are a racist relic of the Jim Crow era and continue to disproportionately impact voters of color.<sup>39</sup> Recent efforts in several states have made substantial progress toward abolishing felony disenfranchisement laws. However, this progress is threatened by politicians who have responded by enacting “byzantine statutory scheme[s]” that make it nearly impossible for previously incarcerated citizens to restore their voting rights.<sup>40</sup> As a result, millions of Americans remain barred from voting after serving their sentences and returning to their communities.<sup>41</sup>

Laws that create insurmountable barriers to voting are abhorrent to democratic ideals. Moreover, evidence suggests that states with felony disenfranchisement laws suffer from greater rates of voter disillusionment and criminal recidivism.<sup>42</sup> It is long past time to abolish laws that permanently relegate formerly incarcerated people to the margins of our political community.

## CLARIFY FEDERAL LAW TO PROTECT RESTORED RIGHTS

Under the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA), states must “*inform applicants of voter eligibility requirements.*”<sup>43</sup> This language is too permissive: states like Florida have used forms that say “you cannot register until your right to vote is restored” but provide no guidance on how to restore one’s right to vote, and then prosecute people who made good-faith efforts to fulfill the requirements but were not successful.<sup>44</sup> Efforts to hold Florida accountable to the NVRA in court have failed.<sup>45</sup>

The proposed legislative solution would amend the NVRA to require states to make clear the steps required to restore one’s voting rights.



Voting Rights for Formerly Incarcerated People

- Some people with felony convictions cannot vote.
- People in prison cannot vote. Everyone else can vote.
- Everyone has the right to vote.
- People with felony convictions can vote upon completion of sentence.

## Felony Disenfranchisement Laws By State <sup>46</sup>

Specifically, the proposal would replace the NVRA’s requirement that “*each State shall...inform applicants of...Voter eligibility requirements*” with language that reads: “*each State shall...inform applicants of...Voter eligibility requirements and detail the steps formerly incarcerated citizens must complete to restore their voting rights if voting rights are not restored automatically upon release from prison.*” (emphasis added).<sup>47</sup>

## CALL TO ACTION

The recent groundswell of activism that has led to the successful abolition of felony disenfranchisement laws in states across the country suggests that a grassroots effort by voters could generate support for this proposal, despite the polarized political environment. Therefore, please contact your elected representatives in the U.S. House and Senate and ask them to amend the NVRA.

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*Grady S. MacPhee (J.D. '24) is a graduate student at Duke University.*

# Normalize Voting at Home

Increase political engagement by mailing ballots to all registered voters

## BARRIERS TO THE BALLOT BOX

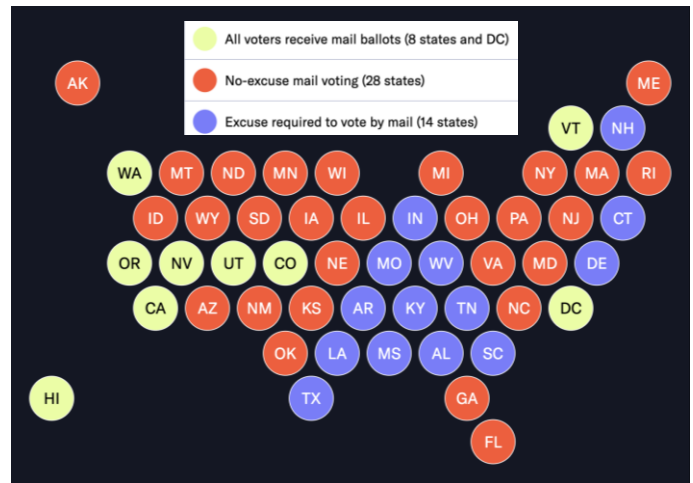
Barriers to accessing the ballot box hinder participation in U.S. elections. In 2016, 14% of registered voters who did not vote cited finding the time as an obstacle to casting a ballot.<sup>48</sup> For voters with disabilities, more than half of polling locations pose at least one hurdle reducing accessibility.<sup>49</sup>

With COVID-19 presenting new challenges, 29 states passed measures expanding voting access in 2020.<sup>50</sup> For the first time, more voters cast ballots by mail than in person.<sup>51</sup> A backlash followed: although a majority of Republicans and Democrats supported voting by mail without excuse in 2018, GOP support dropped to 28% by 2024, as unsubstantiated fears about election security rose.<sup>52</sup> GOP legislators proposed new restrictions across the country. Under the new laws, rejections of mailed-in ballots spiked due to errors like signing or dating the ballot incorrectly.<sup>53</sup> This disproportionately impacted voters of color, who are more likely to vote by mail.<sup>54</sup>

## THE EASE OF VOTING AT HOME

In a Vote at Home system, every registered voter receives a ballot in the mail two to three weeks before the election.<sup>55</sup> Mailing ballots increases turnout, reduces costs, and nudges voters to become better informed on the candidates and issues.<sup>56, 57, 58</sup>

Eight states currently send ballots by mail to all voters, with no request needed.<sup>59</sup> Nevada, California, Vermont, and DC all adopted the system after 2020.<sup>60</sup> Oregon fosters civic education by pairing ballots with voters' pamphlets containing submitted issue comments and candidate statements.<sup>61</sup> In Colorado, voters can choose to submit ballots via voting centers, secure drop-boxes, or USPS.<sup>62</sup> Federal laws already help to facilitate mailing ballots by requiring Election Mail systems, voter registration lists, and sending ballots to overseas voters.<sup>63</sup>



Few States Mail Ballots to All Voters<sup>64</sup>

Despite a reliable Republican majority, Utah retains its vote-by-mail system, with over 90% of ballots cast by mail in 2022.<sup>65</sup> The Republican National Committee's recent call for absentee voting signals an opportunity to publicly assert bipartisan support.<sup>66</sup>

In a highly feasible, efficient way, the Vote at Home model equitably targets the needs of those with reduced access to the polling place and simultaneously benefits all voters.

## CALL TO ACTION

Advocates should promote a ballot-by-mail system at the federal, state, and local level. At the federal level, legislators should begin bipartisan collaboration on the proposed Vote at Home Act.<sup>67</sup> Citizens can call their representatives to support this initiative. Advocates can learn from and publicize the National Vote at Home Institute's work.<sup>68</sup>

States should allow counties to opt into the Vote at Home system to build buy-in. Local efforts can still leverage national resources: The Election Assistance Commission and USPS can partner with counties to build a centralized system for tracking ballots.<sup>69, 70</sup>

*Abi McDougal (MPP '24) is a graduate student at Duke University.*

# End Partisan Gerrymandering

Create independent redistricting commissions to enhance election integrity

## PARTISAN GERRYMANDERING ERODES ELECTION INTEGRITY

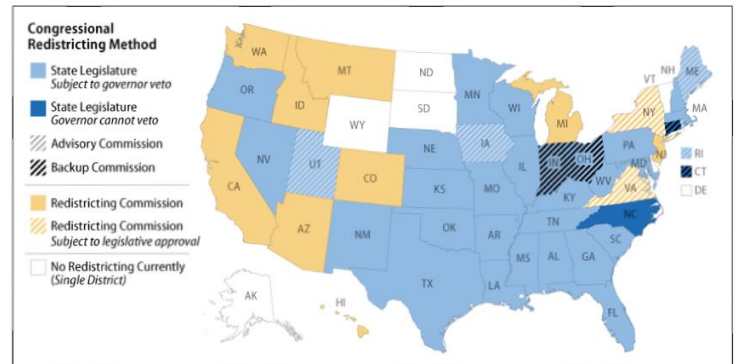
As the redistricting process unfolds every 10 years in the United States, there is a growing trend of partisan gerrymandering. Partisan gerrymandering is the manipulation of electoral districts to favor one political party over another.<sup>71</sup> One example occurs in North Carolina, where the state's newly approved congressional map could shift a previously evenly-matched 7-7 delegation to a projected 10-4, or even 11-3, Republican advantage.<sup>72</sup>

Partisan gerrymandering not only directly affects political representation, the balance of power, and public trust, but it also has a broader implication on the integrity of elections and the democratic process.<sup>73</sup>

## A BETTER APPROACH: INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONS

The challenge of gerrymandering extends beyond the boundaries of any single state, affecting the integrity of the entire democratic process. One proposed solution is to establish Independent Redistricting Commissions (IRC) through state constitutional amendments in all states with three or more congressional districts.<sup>74</sup> Thirteen states have already established IRCs to delineate congressional districts, while the rest of the states continue to draw their district boundaries via state legislatures.<sup>75</sup> IRCs will ensure a democratic, fair, transparent, and impartial redistricting process, thereby strengthening the integrity of elections.

The IRC should reflect a balance of representation, with members comprised of Democrats, Republicans, and unaffiliated voters. The process followed by the IRC in each state would include extensive public participation, with mandatory hearings, and



Current Congressional Redistricting Methods<sup>76</sup>

an absolute majority in decision-making within the IRC.

While state legislatures would ultimately approve the redistricting maps drawn by the IRC, the IRC could be given veto power over the final maps to ensure that the outcomes reflect the independent judgment of the IRC.

## CALL TO ACTION

To end partisan gerrymandering:

- In states with initiative and referendum mechanisms, citizens can initiate constitutional amendments to create IRCs or participate in grassroots campaigns to gather signatures for ballot measures.
- In states lacking these mechanisms, it is important to lobby legislators to gain bipartisan support for the amendment.
- Those who wish to learn more on how to design an IRC can refer to the Campaign Legal Center's report: [Designing Independent Redistricting Commissions](#).

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