

States can't ignore election integrity

Protecting the ballot box should be a top priority

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Better, but not nearly good enough. Such is the status of election integrity as states prepare for the 2024 election. Many have enacted reforms since the 2020 election, which spawned widespread fear about fraud and manipulation due to a series of unprecedented and profoundly unwise policies.

Yet most states have more work to do, and some have yet to do anything. As state legislatures come back into session in January, their top priority should be protecting the ballot box, lest the 2024 elections further destabilize Americans' trust in democracy.

The 2020 elections were arguably the least secure in American history. Many states quickly embraced questionable and even dangerous voting practices, such as expanded absentee ballots and unmonitored drop boxes. Others allowed ballot harvesting or let votes come in after Election Day itself.

And almost every state saw a large influx of private funding for election administration, paying for voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives in some areas but not others. The mere existence of such concerning policies sows doubt in voters' minds about election transparency, security and validity.

Elections are built on a foundation of trust, so any policy or practice that undermines that trust must be reformed. That matters in every state, especially in the swing states on which the presidential and key congressional races may hinge.

Georgia is an example of reform done right. In the wake of the 2020 elections, lawmakers passed new requirements for the regular cleaning of voter rolls as well as voter ID for absentee ballots. Georgia has also banned ballot harvesting while adding security to absentee ballot drop boxes.

And the Peach State no longer allows private parties to pay for public officials to administer elections, which is now a felony. Yet other swing states — including Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — have enacted only a few of these protections, if any.

Blue states have enacted close to zero of these reforms.

Where do states still need to act? There are four main areas based on the lessons of the 2020 elections.

- Clean voter rolls. Three years ago, few states conducted sufficient checks of their voter rolls to ensure that only eligible people cast ballots. States like Florida, Iowa and North Carolina have taken steps to right this wrong.

Election officials can and should check voter rolls against local, state and federal databases on at least an annual basis up to 90 days before an election. Every state should enact this policy so that ineligible voters are caught before Election Day.

- Secure ballots. The explosion in absentee voting has created a loophole in voter ID laws, since most states don't require absentee voters to prove their identity. A handful of states, including Georgia, Missouri, Ohio and Texas, have closed this loophole, but most haven't.

Similarly, fewer than 10 states, including Arkansas, Missouri and Ohio, have either prohibited drop boxes or required that they be placed in government offices and other secure locations. And since 2020, a further six states, such as North Carolina, have required that all absentee or mail-in ballots be received by Election Day. Every state should take up these policies to prevent tampering with ballots.

- Stop ballot harvesting. In the past three years, several states — including Florida and Ohio — have either prohibited or severely limited third parties from turning in voters' absentee or mail-in ballots.

Missouri has gone a step further, banning third parties from the unsolicited distribution of absentee ballots.

Yet from Pennsylvania to Virginia and beyond, ballot harvesting remains legal. More states need to ban it, since ballot harvesting has a long history of being abused by third parties to benefit their preferred candidates on both sides of the aisle.

- Ban private election funding. In the 2020 election, private parties gave more than \$400 million to local election officials, with most of the money going to jurisdictions that voted for Joe Biden. This funding likely increased vote totals for Democratic candidates since it paid for election activities that didn't take place in Republican areas. Since then, 27 states have banned or severely restricted such funding, but states like Colorado and Wisconsin have not. States should ensure that elections are funded solely by taxpayers, not outside actors who may have ulterior motives.

These policies are the bare minimum for election integrity. It would be better if states went even further — say, creating an investigative office to protect elections by finding and

prosecuting fraudulent actors. Arkansas, Florida, Ohio and Virginia have gone that route. Regardless, every state should take added steps to protect elections before the first ballots are cast later this year.

If they don't, millions of voters will still have reason to doubt the election outcomes. Americans can't afford another major election defined by distrust in the integrity of the ballot box.

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