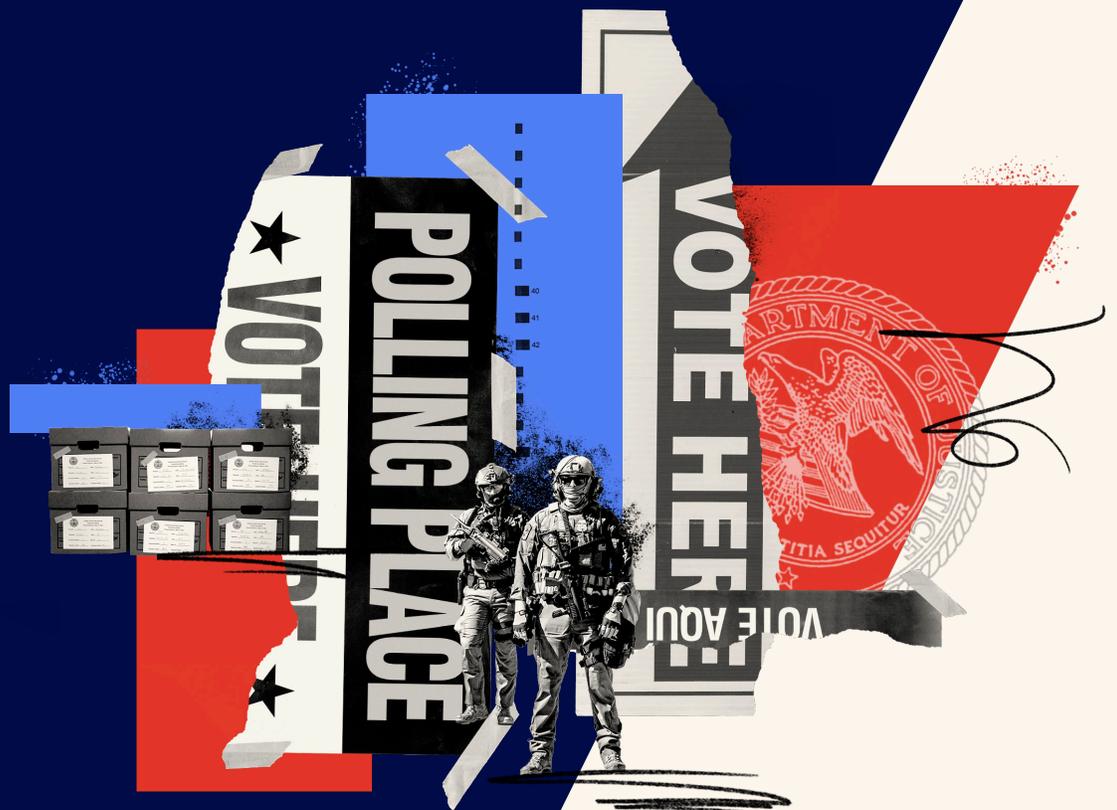


# Executive Override

How the Trump administration is using federal power to deceive Americans, disrupt our elections, and deny fair results — and what we can do to stop it.

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**Protect Democracy is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing American democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government.**

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# Executive Summary

**FOR THE FIRST TIME** in modern American history, the machinery of the federal government — which is meant to serve our democracy — is being turned against our elections.

American elections have never been perfectly free and fair for everyone. Voter suppression, gerrymandering, and disinformation have long been features of our political landscape. Foreign governments have worked to undermine public confidence in our democracy. And for the past decade, President Trump and his allies have spread lies about election fraud to delegitimize results they didn't like. None of that is new.

What is new — and what makes 2026 different — is that the Trump administration is now turning the full power of the federal government against our own elections. This is not a continuation of the old playbook. It is a dramatic escalation.

For the first time, the lies are being amplified from all corners of our government. For the first time, federal law enforcement agencies are being deployed to manufacture the appearance of election fraud, intimidate election officials, and lay the groundwork for contesting results. For the first time, a president is openly threatening to seize direct control over how elections are run — “whether approved by Congress or not.”

The administration's goal is not simply to control the machinery of the elections, but also to silence the voices of those who oppose them.

Voting is a crucial way Americans can exercise real power over the decisions that affect our lives. Without free and fair elections, we don't have a government of, by, or for the people. Federal intervention in our elections is, at its core, an assault on our ability to hold those in power accountable.

The administration is counting on confusion — a fog of investigations, executive orders, disinformation campaigns, and legal maneuvers that are difficult to track in full. Individually, each action can be made to look like a legitimate exercise of executive authority. Together, they form a coherent and deeply alarming strategy.

This strategy shares the same components of the subversion efforts of 2022 and 2024: **deceive** voters about the trustworthiness of election systems, **disrupt** the operation of those systems, and use the ensuing chaos to **deny** unfavorable election outcomes. This year, we will see these tactics supercharged with the full power of the federal government. This report describes in detail how — and what we can do to ensure it does not succeed.

# The administration's Executive Override strategy

## Deceive

MANUFACTURE FALSE NARRATIVES TO CREATE A PRETEXT FOR DISRUPTION AND DENIAL

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### 1 Supercharge conspiracies and lies from inside the White House

The administration has made election denialism official federal policy by using investigative and enforcement powers to manufacture the appearance of fraud, dismantle the agencies that protect elections from real threats, and flood the public with disinformation designed to erode confidence in the 2026 midterms.

## Disrupt

USE THE MIGHT OF GOVERNMENT TO QUASH POLITICAL ACTIVITY AND MANIPULATE ELECTION RULES

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### 2 Deploy federal power against opponents, organizations, and officials

The administration has used investigative, prosecutorial, and regulatory power to target political opponents, civil society organizations that support democratic participation, and nonpartisan election officials — imposing costs and creating a climate of fear that deters opposition, voter engagement, and faithful public service.

### 3 Use violence to silence Americans and deter voting

The administration has used and threatened violence to quash protests and political assembly, and it has created conditions for voter intimidation through its deployment of federal law enforcement and rhetoric about deploying ICE agents at or near polling locations.

### 4 Manipulate election rules to block eligible voters

Through executive orders, legislation, and coercive pressure on states, the administration has pursued a coordinated effort to override the Constitution's delegation of election authority to states and Congress, seize control over election administration, and make it harder for millions of eligible Americans to register and vote.

## Deny

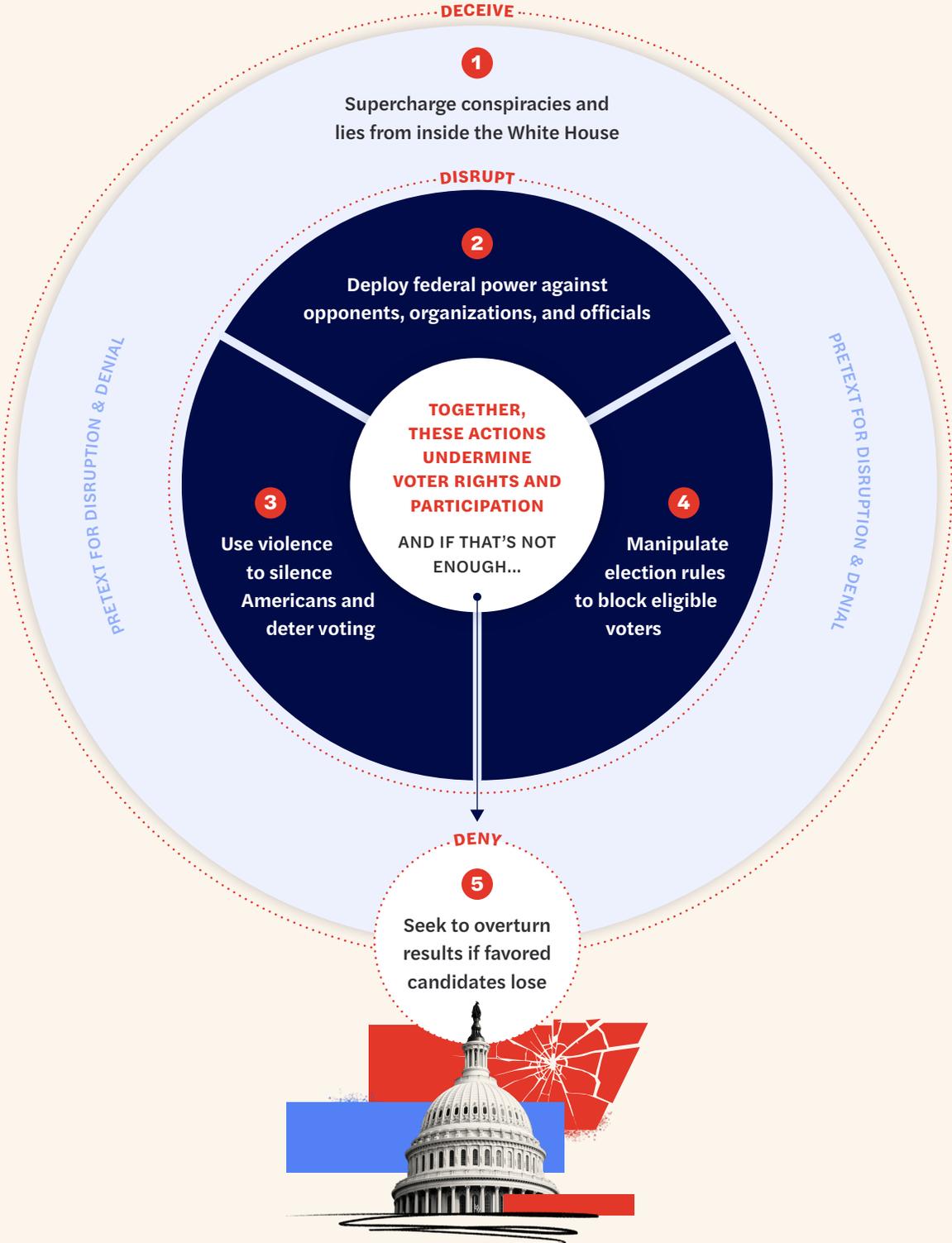
INTERVENE TO CONTEST AND REVERSE UNFAVORABLE RESULTS

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### 5 Seek to overturn the results if favored candidates lose

If the administration can't hold on to power by tilting the electoral playing field or making it harder for Americans to vote, then the conspiracy theories, the rule changes, the data collection, and the targeting of officials serve as building blocks for their final gambit: contesting, delaying, or overturning election results the administration doesn't like through law enforcement action, certification refusals, frivolous litigation, and potential defiance of the courts.

# How these tactics target our election



The administration entrenches in power allies who will enable their agenda – whether or not it's what the American people want.

## Defending our elections

The final section of this report describes critical actions to safeguard elections against the **Deceive, Disrupt, Deny** strategy that can be taken by some of the key actors who have the power and the responsibility to make a difference:

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### Journalists, influencers, and creators

#### ✓ Inform the public honestly and accurately

Those with media platforms can establish clear protocols for covering government disinformation, connecting the dots between specific abuses of power and the broader strategy, and shedding light rather than fear.

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### Election officials and state and local leaders

#### ✓ Prepare now for likely threats

Officials across the country can get smart on the law and the likely threats before the pressure arrives, make concrete plans for how to respond when it does, and build solidarity with counterparts across states and communities so that no one faces that pressure alone.

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### Private sector and civil society leaders

#### ✓ Speak out and organize

From business and labor to universities and faith communities, leaders across every sector can speak out, organize, and act in defense of elections. By using their credibility and reach, they can help protect civic participation and our election system and make it clear: attacks on our elections will not go unanswered.

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### Legal community

#### ✓ Ensure the justice system upholds the law

Legal actors — from grand jurors who scrutinize the evidence to magistrates who decline to rubber-stamp deficient warrants to judges who apply the law rigorously — can serve as a vital check against election subversion, particularly in the fast-moving post-election period.

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### We the people

#### ✓ Actively participate in democracy

Americans can counter disinformation, strengthen community connections, volunteer as poll workers, and be prepared to mobilize peacefully if a critical moment demands it.

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## **Collective action and solidarity is the answer**

This report does not call on anyone to do anything extraordinary. None of the actions we call for requires heroism — just determination and collective action. All of them, taken together, can uphold the law and safeguard our democracy.

The administration's strategy depends on isolating its targets — picking off election officials, judges, and civil society organizations one by one, before a broader coalition can mobilize in their defense. The antidote to that strategy is solidarity: making sure that no community, advocate, or official who does the right thing is left to face the administration's wrath alone, and that the political and legal cost of election subversion is visible and real.

Our electoral system is strong. It is run by state and local officials in all 50 states who, by and large, take their responsibilities seriously. It has a track record in which Democrats and Republicans have both won and lost, and in which results have been accepted on all sides. If people in key roles follow the law and do the right thing in the face of attacks, we will be able to protect the 2026 election.

# Introduction

**WHILE THE THREAT** to this fall's election is unprecedented in scale, it did not come out of nowhere. It traces a pattern familiar from authoritarian takeovers abroad, where tilting the electoral playing field has been a key step in dismantling democracy. It's also the outgrowth of an election denial movement that emerged after the 2020 election and has now taken root in the highest levels of the federal government.

## Modern authoritarians hijack elections to entrench power

What distinguishes the totalitarians of the past from the authoritarians of today? Most authoritarian leaders who have risen to power in 21st century democracies and then consolidated authoritarian control do not stop holding elections. Instead, they continue to hold elections in some form and use their repeated victories to justify their ongoing claim to power. But the question of who will win those elections is never truly in doubt. In these competitive authoritarian states, the electoral playing field has been tilted — by sidelining opponents and rigging the rules — to ensure the authoritarian's victory.

“ Today's autocrats claim to be the defenders of free elections and popular will while simultaneously chipping away at the power that voters have to vote them out.

In order to justify consolidating power over elections, autocrats more often than not turn to preemptive fraud claims. Vladimir Putin gradually extinguished any semblance of competitive elections in Russia, while portraying his pro-democracy critics as western-backed foreign agents trying to interfere in Russian politics. In Brazil in 2022, Jair Bolsonaro attempted to subvert a free and fair election — one that he eventually lost — in part by spreading false claims of fraud. In Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro declared

victory in the 2024 election while refusing to publish the final ballot count, accusing the opposition of attempting “a criminal cyber-fascist coup d’état.”

The modern authoritarian playbook is to seize power by weaponizing the language of democracy against democracy itself. Today’s autocrats claim to be the defenders of free elections and popular will while simultaneously chipping away at the power that voters have to vote them out.

## Authoritarian election threats take hold in America

The U.S. has never had perfectly free and fair elections. Elections in the U.S. are built on a foundation of centuries of struggle, compromise, and an ever-evolving contest over who gets to participate in our democracy. Even after the Voting Rights Act banned the most egregious racial restrictions on access to the ballot box, aggressive use of gerrymandering and voter suppression tactics have shaped election outcomes and made it harder for some eligible voters — particularly voters of color — to exercise their right to vote.

But the seeds of the modern authoritarian election threat were sown during President Trump’s first term in office. As early as his 2016 campaign, he began to assert that elections were “rigged” against him and he would only accept the results “if” he won. Ahead of the 2018 election — when the prospect of a Democratic-controlled Congress threatened his power — he began to threaten that law enforcement would be “watch[ing] closely” at the polls, likely with the goal of deterring voters (especially voters of color) from turning out. And after the results were in, he cast doubt on their accuracy.

Trump’s effort to overturn the results of the 2020 election was the logical outgrowth of this campaign. After Joe Biden defeated him at the polls, Trump and his allies pressured state officials to overturn results, filed dozens of frivolous lawsuits claiming the results were tainted by fraud, pressured the Department of Justice (DOJ) to launch sham investigations, and called on members of Congress to halt the certification of the election on January 6, 2021. When those efforts to subvert the legal process failed, Trump and his allies incited the attack on the Capitol in an effort to prevent Congress from certifying the results.

Although the Jan 6 plot was unsuccessful, it catalyzed an attack on U.S. elections that metastasized across the country. Almost immediately, election deniers in numerous statehouses introduced, and sometimes passed, bills to erode nonpartisan checks and increase political control of election systems. Candidates affiliated with the election denial movement sought positions of control over elections at the county and state levels. And multiple unsuccessful efforts were made to overturn election results based on false claims of fraud.

Trump once again echoed these claims of fraud in 2024 — though any claims of fraud in the 2024 election evaporated once it was apparent that he had reclaimed the presidency.

## Trump's Project 2026 to consolidate power and eliminate electoral competition

What makes 2026 so different from 2020 is the nature and scope of the power Trump now wields and the near-total absence of the institutional constraints that once limited him. In his first term, Trump tested the boundaries of executive authority but was repeatedly checked: by advisors who refused unlawful orders, by a DOJ that maintained some independence, by a Congress that conducted oversight, and by courts that repeatedly enforced constitutional limits. Today, the system of internal checks has been largely dismantled, and the external checks from other branches have weakened.

Enabled by a Supreme Court that in 2024 granted the president sweeping immunity and by a unified Republican Congress that has shown little appetite for independent oversight, Trump has constructed something with no precedent in modern American history: a presidency that operates without meaningful legal or political constraint. The blueprint for this transformation, laid out in meticulous detail before the election (and described in our 2024 report on the authoritarian presidency), has been executed with remarkable fidelity: the purge of career civil servants and their replacement with ideological loyalists, the subordination of law enforcement and intelligence agencies to direct presidential control, and the aggressive concentration of all federal power in the hands of one man.

The consequences of this consolidation are visible across every domain of federal power. Trump has deployed the DOJ against political enemies, used the threat of federal funding cuts to coerce states and institutions into compliance, dismantled the independent agencies that once served as guardrails, and in several instances simply defied court orders with few or no apparent consequences. This is not the chaotic norm-breaking of the first term – it is something more deliberate and more dangerous. The institutions and norms that once made such abuses self-limiting have been hollowed out or captured. What remains is a federal government that, in critical respects, has been converted into an instrument of personal and partisan power – and that instrument is now being turned toward the 2026 election.

Trump has been working to undermine the results of elections he or his party loses for a decade, employing what we have called the **Deceive, Disrupt, Deny** strategy. In 2026, he is again deploying this strategy – only this time with the full control over the powers of the federal government.

# Deceive

## Manufacturing the pretext for federal intervention

Today, the lies and conspiracies are coming from inside the White House. Since taking office in January 2025, the second Trump administration has institutionalized election denialism, stocking the executive branch with loyalists who actively promote the falsehood that the 2020 election was stolen and that our election system cannot be trusted.

### OVERRIDE TACTIC

- 1 Supercharge conspiracies and lies from inside the White House

# 1 Supercharge conspiracies and lies from inside the White House

**FROM 2020 TO 2024**, election denialism was a movement of outsiders — fringe actors, online communities, and hyper-partisan media. Trump was the ringleader, but the effort lacked the full powers of the federal government. Today, the lies and conspiracies are coming from inside the White House. Since taking office in January 2025, the second Trump administration has institutionalized election denialism, stocking the executive branch with loyalists who actively promote the falsehood that the 2020 election was stolen and that our election system cannot be trusted.

And the administration is not simply repeating old lies; it is using the investigative, intelligence, and enforcement powers of the executive branch to manufacture the appearance of evidence for those lies, to sow public doubt about the integrity of the upcoming midterms, and to lay the groundwork for contesting any results it does not like. There is little doubt as to the ultimate purpose: to create a moral and legal pretext for intervention in 2026. In order for the administration to successfully interfere with the election and, ultimately, overturn unfavorable results, they first need to convince a sufficient portion of the public that our election system is unreliable.

## Promoting election denialism as official policy

President Trump has used the presidency as a platform to spread false and misleading claims about American elections. And he has filled the halls of power with those who share his affinity for election conspiracy theories and are equally committed to using the executive branch as an amplifier of election disinformation. The administration has focused on three false claims.

### The 2020 “Big Lie”

Trump and other administration officials continue to insist that the 2020 election was stolen. Administration officials have used their positions to promote the spurious claim that foreign governments conspired to steal the 2020 election for Joe Biden. And rather than recognize the January 6 attacks on the Capitol as a national tragedy, the White House has sought to lionize the perpetrators and turn them into heroes, or at least the victims of Biden administration overreach.

## Claims that mail-in voting and voting machines are “rigged”

The administration has repeatedly sought to cast doubt on the reliability of mail-in voting and voting machines. Trump has even ordered the U.S. Election Assistance Commission to decertify every voting machine it had previously certified — an order that is beyond his authority and is the subject of pending litigation.

## Lies about noncitizens stealing elections

This has been the administration's dominant false narrative. In reality, states have robust systems to prevent noncitizen voting, and it is vanishingly rare. Michigan's 2024 audit turned up just 15 potential noncitizen votes out of more than 5.7 million cast. Georgia found 20 potential noncitizens out of 8.2 million registered voters. The near non-existence of noncitizen voting makes sense: any noncitizen who tried to cast a ballot would face severe penalties.

## Directing federal action to fuel conspiracies

The administration has sought to fuel these lies through high-stakes federal action, effectively turning law enforcement and intelligence agencies into conduits for partisan disinformation. Here are four key examples:

### The FBI's January 2026 raid of an election office in Fulton County, Georgia

This raid, in which hundreds of boxes of state election materials were seized, was an unprecedented exercise of federal power against a state election system. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Tulsi Gabbard was personally present, despite having no domestic law enforcement authority. The unsealed affidavit supporting the government's application for a warrant relied on misleading claims that omitted key findings from prior state reviews of the election results; namely, Fulton County's 2020 ballots were counted three separate times, with the results affirmed each time. Attorney General Bondi has since appointed the U.S. attorney who obtained the search warrant to lead election-integrity investigations nationwide. The raid appears to be a sign of what's to come: using federal law enforcement to try to bolster repeatedly debunked conspiracy theories. As one Georgia State Senator put it: “This is not about 2020. This is about 2026. This is about who controls what comes next.” The administration has also subpoenaed records related to the 2020 election from Maricopa County, Arizona — another hotbed of election conspiracy theories.

## Seeking to seize state voter rolls and remove voters

The administration has demanded full, unredacted rolls from 48 states and D.C., and sued more than 20 states that have refused to comply. Federal courts have dismissed multiple DOJ lawsuits. After the murder of Alex Pretti in Minneapolis, the administration demanded that Minnesota provide its voter rolls as a condition of de-escalating the reign of terror by federal immigration authorities — demanding state voter rolls in

exchange for withdrawing armed agents. Confidential memoranda reveal the real plan: in an extraordinary assertion of federal authority over state election administration, the DOJ intends to analyze the data and instruct states to remove specific voters. The DOJ is also sharing voter roll data with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to search for noncitizens, likely using the notoriously unreliable SAVE database, creating a serious risk that eligible voters (including naturalized citizens) will be wrongly flagged and purged before the 2026 midterms.

### **Demanding conspiracy-fueled investigations and prosecutions**

The administration has paired its false rhetoric about noncitizen voting with a high-profile push to find and prosecute individual cases — not because the problem is widespread, but to spread conspiracy theories. To facilitate this, the administration overhauled DHS's SAVE database into a bulk voter-verification tool. But the results confirm what experts have long said: noncitizen voting is vanishingly rare. It's not surprising that DOJ efforts to prosecute noncitizen voters have been slowed by a lack of evidence, as the conspiracy theories do not hold up.

### **Seizing voting machines to promote conspiracies about Venezuela**

In May 2025, a team supervised by DNI Gabbard seized voting machines in Puerto Rico, ostensibly to investigate allegations that Venezuela had hacked the territory's voting systems. Independent experts noted that what Gabbard's office described as "vulnerabilities" — such as cellular modems transmitting encrypted vote totals — are common and well-understood features.

### **Removing checks on the spread of online disinformation**

The administration has also targeted the broader ecosystem of people and organizations that work to counter election disinformation online.

### **Targeting trusted sources of information**

In December 2025, the State Department directed consular officers to deny visas to foreign nationals who have worked in fact-checking, content moderation, trust and safety, or combating misinformation. This directive, coupled with years of political pressure, has already had a chilling effect: Meta eliminated its third-party fact-checking program in January 2025, explicitly citing the political environment, and other platforms have similarly retreated from content moderation. As a result, voters are losing access to reliable, independent sources that can help them distinguish between accurate information and disinformation about elections — leaving conspiracy theories to spread unchecked.

## **Gutting federal election security infrastructure**

On Attorney General Bondi's first day in office, she disbanded the FBI task force tracking foreign influence operations from Russia, China, and Iran. And since Trump took office, roughly one-third of the workforce of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) — approximately 1,000 employees — has departed through firings, forced resignations, and buyouts. CISA is the federal agency that state and local election officials have relied on to defend their systems against cyberattacks, share threat intelligence across state lines, and receive the training and technical support needed to keep elections secure — particularly against foreign adversaries. In March 2025, CISA halted all election security support for state officials and terminated funding for the cross-state threat-monitoring system. CISA's proposed FY2026 budget would entirely eliminate the agency's Election Security Program. For the first time in years, CISA did not activate its Election Day situation room during the November 2025 elections.

## **Using regulatory threats to suppress information**

Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chair Brendan Carr has repeatedly used the regulatory authority of the FCC to attack coverage, and even comedy, that challenges the administration's preferred narratives. He opened an investigation into a radio station that reported public information about ICE activity and openly threatened to remove Jimmy Kimmel from the air. Most recently, he opened an enforcement action against *The View* for an interview of Texas Democratic Senate candidate James Talarico. No similar actions have been taken against allies of the President or his agenda.

The result is that election conspiracy theories now face fewer checks just as the federal government is working hardest to spread them.

# Disrupt

## Tilting the electoral playing field

In his second term, President Trump has made unprecedented use of his control over key federal agencies to tilt the electoral playing field in favor of his preferred candidates. As the election draws closer, we should be prepared for these actions to accelerate.

### OVERRIDE TACTICS

- 2 Deploy federal power against opponents, organizations, and officials
- 3 Use violence to silence Americans and deter voting
- 4 Manipulate election rules to block eligible voters

## 2 Deploy federal power against opponents, organizations, and officials

**THE ADMINISTRATION HAS SYSTEMATICALLY** used federal investigative, prosecutorial, and regulatory power to target three groups of people who stand in the way of its effort to control the 2026 elections: political opponents, civil society organizations that support democratic participation, and nonpartisan election officials. In each case, the goal is not necessarily to secure convictions — it is to intimidate, to impose costs, and to deter others from following their example.

### Retaliatory actions against perceived critics

Control over federal law enforcement agencies gives President Trump enormous power to seek to embarrass and discredit opposition political leaders. And in his second term, he hasn't been afraid to use it. Take the following examples:

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**Chris Krebs**  
**Miles Taylor**

Trump signed an executive order in April 2025 directing investigations of Chris Krebs, former Director of CISA, and Miles Taylor, former administrative staff assistant at DHS — two members of the first Trump administration who have become perceived opponents.

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**John Brennan**  
**James Comey**  
**John Bolton**

The DOJ has launched investigations and/or filed indictments of former officials and prominent Trump critics John Brennan, James Comey and John Bolton.

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**Letitia James**  
**Sen. Schiff (D-CA)**  
**Lisa Cook**

From his perch at the Federal Housing Finance Agency, Trump ally Bill Pulte has instigated investigations of Letitia James (who prosecuted Trump in New York), Sen. Adam Schiff (D-CA) (a leading Trump critic in the Senate), and Lisa Cook (a Democratic-appointed governor of the Federal Reserve whom Trump is seeking to remove).

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**Rep. McIver (D-NJ)**

The administration also indicted Rep. LaMonica McIver (D-NJ) on assault charges after she conducted a congressional oversight visit at an ICE detention facility in Newark, despite video evidence that, according to independent legal experts, did not clearly support the charge.

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**Sen. Kelly (D-AZ)**  
**Sen. Slotkin (D-MI)**  
**Rep. Crow (D-CO)**  
**Rep. Goodlander (D-NH)**  
**Rep. Houlahan (D-PA)**  
**Rep. Deluzio (D-PA)**

The administration has also tried (and failed) to prosecute Democratic members of Congress directly for their political speech and official conduct. In November 2025, six Democratic lawmakers — Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Sen. Elissa Slotkin (D-MI), and Reps. Jason Crow (D-CO), Maggie Goodlander (D-NH), Chrissy Houlahan (D-PA), and Chris Deluzio (D-PA) — posted a video urging service members to refuse unconstitutional orders. Trump immediately demanded their prosecution, calling their conduct “SEDITIONOUS BEHAVIOR, punishable by DEATH.” The DOJ led by Trump loyalist Jeanine Pirro, sought to prosecute them and brought the case to a grand jury — only to fail to secure a single vote for indictment, an extraordinarily rare rebuke of federal prosecutors.

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**ABC,**  
***Jimmy Kimmel Live!***

The Federal Communications Commission has targeted television networks for airing programs critical of the administration — pressuring ABC to cancel *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, imposing a new interpretation of the equal time rule to bar talk shows from airing interviews with Democratic politicians, and seeming to favor mergers that would put media entities under the control of Trump allies.

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► **LEARN MORE:** [Protect Democracy’s Retaliatory Actions Tracker](#)

In the context of 2026, we should be prepared to see law enforcement action aimed to discredit prominent candidates or the Democratic Party as a whole. This could include investigations or indictments aimed at candidates themselves or their allies (aiming to tar candidates by association). One potential example that could resurface this year: in November 2025, Trump publicly directed Attorney General Pam Bondi (and she agreed) to launch an investigation into prominent Democrats over their alleged ties to Jeffrey Epstein, while staying notably silent about Republicans with similar ties.

## Targeting civil society defenders of democracy and voting rights

The administration’s weaponization of investigation and enforcement authorities will not be limited to high-profile political leaders. It is almost certain to reach the civil society organizations — including advocacy organizations and groups that support voter participation, among others — that are part of our robust political life. So too has it targeted the non-partisan election officials who effectively run our elections.

The administration began taking action to undermine nonprofit organizations just a few weeks into Trump’s second term, but its assault on perceived ideological opponents accelerated in September 2025 after the murder of Charlie Kirk. The president issued

National Security Presidential Memorandum-7 (NSPM-7), which painted organizations on “the Left” as part of a network of dangerous extremists. According to NSPM-7, these extremists are united by beliefs like “anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, and anti-Christianity; support for the overthrow of the United States Government; extremism on migration, race, and gender; and hostility towards those who hold traditional American views on family, religion, and morality.” A subsequent implementing memo from Attorney General Bondi directs the DOJ to create and maintain lists of these “domestic terrorism organizations” based on their ideological beliefs, calls for an Antifa tip line, and directs the agency to map “nodes,” “cells,” and “funders” of this supposed movement. Republicans in Congress have also focused on left-leaning nonprofits in recent hearings.

This infrastructure for ideological targeting is particularly dangerous in an election context. Nonprofit organizations play a lawful — and significant — role in registering voters, educating them about the issues, and supporting get-out-the-vote efforts. The administration has already taken aim at voter-registration groups in one context, by barring nonpartisan civic engagement groups (like the League of Women Voters) from registering new citizens at naturalization ceremonies. (A legal challenge to this policy is now pending.)

We anticipate that the DOJ will turn its focus to election-related groups in the run-up to the election. The State of Texas has modeled this line of attack. In November 2025, the state sued a Texas civic-participation organization, Jolt Initiative, with the aim of shutting it down. For now, that suit has been put on hold by a federal court on the basis that the suit was unlawful retaliation in violation of the First Amendment. For Texas, this is only the latest in a string of election-related criminal charges over the years, the vast majority of which have been dismissed before trial. But even when they don’t result in criminal convictions, such charges create a climate of fear around elections and risk deterring groups from participating in lawful voter-education and voter-registration activities.

## **Investigating, threatening, and intimidating non-partisan election officials for doing their jobs**

The administration’s campaign to change election rules is backed by the implicit — and sometimes explicit — threat of criminal prosecution against officials who resist. As previously discussed, Trump signed an executive order targeting former CISA director Chris Krebs for defending the integrity of the 2020 election. Attorney General Bondi has appointed a U.S. attorney to lead nationwide investigations of election officials. The DOJ has reportedly explored whether it can bring criminal charges against election officials for failing to maintain cybersecurity standards that the administration itself has defined — based not on evidence of actual security failures, but on assumptions driven by false claims of fraud. And the SAVE America Act would expose local election workers to criminal liability for registration decisions made in good faith.

These threats have real consequences. [The Brennan Center's 2025 survey](#) of local election officials found that 59 percent of them have reported fear of political interference in their ability to do their jobs, and 46 percent were concerned about politically motivated investigations. In a [2024 survey](#), 21 percent said they were unlikely to continue serving through the 2026 midterms. The departure of experienced, nonpartisan election administrators is itself a form of election manipulation: it creates vacuums that can be filled by partisan actors more willing to go along with the wishes of election deniers or bend to political pressure.

At the same time, the administration has worked to undermine accountability for actual election-related crimes. In Colorado, Tina Peters — a county clerk [convicted of four felonies](#) for giving an unauthorized individual access to voting equipment in service of conspiracy theories about the 2020 election — was sentenced to nine years in prison. The Trump administration has sought to free her, with the DOJ filing a [statement of interest](#) supporting her habeas corpus petition and Trump himself [publicly declaring](#) her innocent. The message to election officials is unmistakable: those who resist the administration's agenda risk investigation and prosecution; those willing to subvert elections in service of the president's conspiracy theories will be protected and celebrated.

## 3 Use violence to silence Americans and deter voting

**THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S EFFORTS** to quell political opposition have not been limited to abuse of the legal system. Across Trump's first and second terms, his administrations have repeatedly resorted to violence to chill political activity. This tactic is likely to become even more dangerous as the election nears.

### Using state violence to quash protest and assembly

Across both his terms, Trump has been quick to use force in response to large-scale protests. During the first Trump administration, the administration used federal law enforcement forces to violently disperse peaceful racial justice protesters in Washington, D.C. and Portland, Oregon. In his second term, courts have repeatedly found that DHS officers ostensibly conducting immigration enforcement have used excessive force in response to peaceful protesters. Trump has also sought to deploy active-duty Marines and federalized National Guard troops to respond to immigration protests in Los Angeles, Portland, and Chicago, though those deployments were largely halted by courts.

Why is this so dangerous? First, in the short term, the use of force may accelerate — rather than tamp down — conflict between protesters and law enforcement. In Portland in 2020, for instance, protests grew significantly after federal forces were deployed, and larger protests brought more potential for conflict between protesters and law enforcement. Second, over time, the use of significant force to quell protests (particularly if the military is involved) is likely to deter protesters from exercising their First Amendment rights and reduce the visible opposition to the regime.

### Threatening violence to intimidate voters

As election day nears, the use of force in civilian settings poses an additional threat: voter intimidation. Since 2018, Trump has repeatedly alluded to or threatened to put on a show of force by law enforcement at the polls, purportedly to crack down on illegal voting. More recently, administration allies like Steve Bannon have suggested that the administration will deploy immigration officials around polling locations, ostensibly to prevent non-citizen voting. (Some administration officials have disclaimed plans to station DHS officials at the polls, but White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt notably said she "can't guarantee" that ICE won't be near polling locations.) When

immigration officials have openly used racial profiling to make arrests and detained upward of 170 U.S. citizens over the first nine months of the Trump administration, the threat of ICE presence at polls — much less their actual deployment — is likely to make many citizens, particularly naturalized citizens and people of color, think twice about going to cast their ballots.

Of course, sending armed federal officers to the polls violates federal law. But if the experience in Minneapolis and other cities is any indication, the administration need not deploy federal law enforcement right at polling places to intimidate voters — a show of force in certain jurisdictions in the weeks prior to the election would likely be sufficient to deter some voters from leaving their homes to go to the polls.

And even if no law enforcement agents or troops are deployed, the administration's rhetoric — drastically exaggerating the risk of non-citizen voting and characterizing political opponents as “the enemy from within” — threatens to inspire private displays of force on Election Day. This transpired in 2022, when conspiracy theories about “ballot mules” led to armed men who stationed themselves outside ballot drop boxes in Arizona. While litigation (brought by our organization) put a stop to those displays, the threat environment for political violence is even worse now than it was then. (To take just one example, many of the federal judges who have ruled against the administration have faced serious violent threats, including phone calls, house calls, and delivery of unsolicited pizzas accompanied by ominous messages to judges' and their families' addresses that incite psychological fears.)

## 4 Manipulate election rules to block eligible voters

**CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE NOT** an end in themselves. They provide a pretext for the federal government to seize control over how elections are run.

The Constitution deliberately places authority over elections with the states and with Congress – not the president – precisely because the Framers feared that executive control over elections would allow the president to keep himself and his allies in office. Those fears were well founded. The Trump administration is pursuing a coordinated campaign to override this constitutional structure through executive orders, legislation, and coercion.

### Issuing Executive Orders and threatening emergency declaration to seek to take over elections

The administration’s most sweeping attempt to change election rules came in March 2025, when Trump signed [Executive Order 14248](#), titled “Preserving and Protecting the Integrity of American Elections.” The order purported to overhaul federal election procedures unilaterally, claiming powers that the Constitution reserves to Congress and the states. Among its provisions, it directed the EAC to require documentary proof of citizenship on the federal voter registration form; it ordered the attorney general to act against states that count mail-in ballots received after Election Day (threatening to disenfranchise military and overseas voters); it directed the EAC to decertify all previously certified voting machines; and it threatened to withhold congressionally appropriated federal election funds from noncompliant states.

Courts have resoundingly rejected these attempts to reshape the election system. Federal judges have issued multiple injunctions blocking key provisions. In permanently blocking the proof-of-citizenship requirement, [Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly](#) wrote: “Because [our Constitution] assigns sole responsibility for election regulation to Congress and the States ... the President lacks the authority to direct [such changes].”

Despite these defeats, the administration has signaled it will keep pushing. In February 2026, [Trump posted](#) that “there will be Voter I.D. for the Midterm Elections, whether approved by Congress or not.” [Reports indicate](#) administration allies are drafting an executive order that would declare a national emergency over elections to claim extraordinary presidential powers over voting procedures.

## Pushing legislation designed to block people from voting

What the Trump administration has been unable to accomplish by executive order, his congressional allies are attempting through legislation. The SAVE America Act — passed by the House on February 11, 2026, on a near-party-line vote of 218–213 — would require every American to provide documentary proof of citizenship (such as a passport or birth certificate) to register to vote in federal elections, and to present photo ID to cast a ballot. It would mandate that states submit voter rolls to DHS for verification and expose election officials to criminal penalties for registering voters who fail to present required documentation, even if those voters are eligible citizens.

The real-world effect of the legislation would be to block millions of eligible American citizens from voting. According to the Brennan Center, more than nine percent of eligible voters do not have ready access to documentary proof of citizenship. Less than half of registered voters possess a valid passport with their current legal name. Eleven percent do not have access to their birth certificate. This law would disproportionately disenfranchise low-income voters, voters of color, military and overseas voters, married women, and transgender individuals whose names may not match their birth certificates. When Arizona and Kansas enacted similar proof-of-citizenship requirements at the state level, tens of thousands of eligible citizens were blocked from registering, and a federal court ultimately struck down the laws.

The SAVE America Act faces an uncertain path in the Senate, where it would need 60 votes to overcome a filibuster. Its more important function may be to fail, giving Trump and his allies a further talking point to dismiss future election results as fraudulent.

## Using coercive federal power to pressure states to prevent people from voting

The administration has deployed a range of coercive tools to pressure state election officials directly. The DOJ's campaign to collect state voter rolls seeks to require states to remove voters identified by the federal government as ineligible within 45 days, potentially violating the National Voter Registration Act's procedural safeguards. States that have refused to comply have faced federal lawsuits or worse, such as the demand that Minnesota hand over its voter rolls as a condition for de-escalating immigration enforcement operations in the state.

The administration has also threatened to withhold hundreds of millions of dollars in federal grants — including funds that help states prepare for terrorism and natural disasters — unless states change their voting rules. As the election approaches, we can expect these funding threats to intensify.

The common thread across these actions is an attempt to centralize power over elections in the executive branch at the expense of the states and Congress — precisely the danger the Constitution is designed to prevent.

# Deny

## Intervening to contest and reverse unfavorable results

The preceding threats — conspiracy theories, targeting of opponents, voter suppression, and rule manipulation — are not independent tactics. They are components of an integrated strategy whose ultimate goal is to create the conditions for the administration to interfere with election results that don't go its way.

### OVERRIDE TACTIC

- 5 Seek to overturn the results if favored candidates lose

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**THE PRECEDING THREATS** — conspiracy theories, targeting of opponents, voter suppression, and rule manipulation — are not independent tactics. They are components of an integrated strategy whose ultimate goal is to create the conditions for the administration to interfere with election results that don't go its way. The conspiracy theories provide the narrative and pretext; the rule changes provide the mechanisms; and if those prove insufficient, the administration is positioning itself to contest, delay, or overturn unfavorable results through law enforcement action, pressure on state and local officials, post-election litigation, and potential defiance of courts.

### Deploying law enforcement to interfere with vote counting

The Fulton County raid demonstrated that this administration will deploy FBI agents to seize state election materials based on conspiracy-theory-driven referrals from administration loyalists. The question now is whether similar actions will be taken not just to relitigate the past but to disrupt elections in real time. The infrastructure for broader interference is already in place: Attorney General Bondi has empowered a special nationwide election prosecutor, and the DOJ has quietly removed from its website the longstanding manual limiting election-year law enforcement activities that could disrupt or influence voting.

The most dangerous scenario involves the post-election seizure of voting machines, ballots, or other election materials on election night or in the days after. If the DOJ were to obtain warrants to seize voting machines or uncounted ballots in key jurisdictions — perhaps citing the same unsubstantiated fraud allegations used to justify the Fulton County raid — it could paralyze the post-election canvass, break the chain of custody required for certification, and generate precisely the chaos needed to justify further intervention. The disruption caused by federal action would itself become the basis for claiming the election was compromised.

### Seeking to coerce state officials to not certify accurate results

Election certification — the statutory process by which local and state officials formally sign off on the completeness and accuracy of vote counts — has historically been a routine, ministerial formality. Since 2020, however, more than 30 rogue local officials across at least eight states have refused to certify election results, citing baseless fraud

claims. Each time, courts and state officials ultimately intervened to compel certification — but only after the refusal consumed scarce time and resources, amplified conspiracy theories, and tested the resilience of state enforcement mechanisms.

What makes 2026 fundamentally different is that the federal government may be actively encouraging local and state refusals to certify election results. Officials may be able to point to federal investigations, FBI raids, and administration rhetoric as justification for their refusal, creating a veneer of federal authority for pretextual refusals.

If certification delays cascade across multiple counties in multiple states simultaneously, the resulting chaos could itself become a basis for the administration to claim the election was tainted — and to argue for federal intervention.

## **Pursuing bad-faith post-election litigation to overturn a valid election**

Even where results are certified, the administration and its allies are likely to challenge them aggressively. A [2024 North Carolina Supreme Court race](#) offers a preview: after losing by 734 votes — a margin confirmed by two recounts — the losing candidate sought to invalidate more than 60,000 lawfully cast ballots by retroactively changing the rules under which the election had been conducted. The litigation dragged on for six months before certification was [finally ordered](#). In 2026, with the federal government actively generating raw material for such challenges through its voter roll campaign, SAVE database queries, and unsubstantiated fraud investigations, we should be prepared for this type of litigation to be deployed simultaneously across multiple states and races.

Every element of the administration's pre-election campaign generates potential ammunition for post-election legal challenges. Fraud claims insufficient to support criminal prosecution can be repackaged as civil lawsuits. Debunked allegations about voting machine vulnerabilities can appear in filings seeking to impound machines or invalidate results. The strategy does not require the litigation to succeed on the merits — only that it creates enough delay, confusion, and doubt to prevent the timely seating of elected officials or to provide a pretext for congressional intervention.

The most sobering dimension of this threat is the possibility that the administration might refuse to comply with court orders that stand in its way. An administration that has systematically attacked the legitimacy of the judiciary, claimed unprecedented executive authority over elections, and demonstrated a willingness to defy courts cannot be relied on to defer to judicial rulings when the stakes are highest.

## **Seeking to coerce Congress to overturn election results — including through inciting violence**

There remains one final mechanism for overturning the midterm election: Congress itself. The process by which Congress seats newly elected members involves human

actors making consequential decisions at defined moments in time. Those actors can be pressured. January 6 taught us that.

What happened on January 6, 2021, was not simply a riot. It was a deliberate attempt to use the threat of violence to coerce members of Congress and Vice President Mike Pence into overturning a legitimate election result. When every legal avenue had been exhausted, Trump turned to force by summoning a mob to the Capitol and directing it at the people who stood between him and the outcome he wanted. The lesson he and his allies appear to have drawn from that day is not that the tactic was wrong, but that it fell short. The January 6 defendants have been pardoned. The event has been recast in administration rhetoric as a heroic act of patriotism. And Trump has spent the intervening years building a more loyal, more disciplined political operation — one with far greater control over the instruments of federal power than he had in 2021.

We should be clear-eyed about what this means for 2026. If the administration finds itself facing unfavorable congressional election results that it has been unable to block through other means, it will likely place enormous pressure on its allies in Congress to intervene through procedural manipulation, delay, or outright refusal to seat legitimately elected members. And if procedural pressure proves insufficient, we should not assume that the threat of violence is off the table. The same playbook that was used against Mike Pence and members of Congress on January 6 could be deployed again.

# Defending Our Elections

## Actions to protect free and fair elections

The Trump administration's intent to deceive, disrupt, and deny in 2026 is clear. The question now is how institutions and individuals charged with defending our elections can prepare to meet the challenge. Our electoral systems in all 50 states are strong, and if those in key roles take action, we can ensure that eligible voters are able to vote, election officials can count ballots accurately, and the candidates who win are able to take office.

### KEY ACTIONS

- ✓ **Journalists, influencers, and creators**  
Inform the public honestly and accurately
- ✓ **Election officials and state and local leaders**  
Prepare now for likely threats
- ✓ **Private sector and civil society leaders**  
Speak out and organize
- ✓ **Legal community**  
Ensure the justice system upholds the law
- ✓ **We the people**  
Actively participate in democracy

# Journalists, Influencers and Creators

## ✓ Inform the public accurately and honestly

Journalists, news and social media voices, and all those with platforms must provide an accurate picture of the full scope of the ongoing assault on our election.

Many of the false narratives around the election will likely come directly from U.S. government sources – including the White House and agencies like the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, and Intelligence Community – that previously were key sources of reliable information about elections.

These agencies have historically been treated as presumptively reliable sources – and for good reason. That presumption can no longer be applied automatically. This puts journalists in genuinely difficult territory. Reporters will need new protocols and independent sources to do their jobs well in this environment.

Reporters, newsrooms, editors, and producers should, in advance, establish clear protocols for how they plan to cover obvious (or even suspected) false claims by government actors. They should also line up reliable sources in key states and at the federal level that can independently verify or debunk suspected claims by government officials.

Those in the media and others with platforms and audiences can follow these basic rules to navigate the unique context of the 2026 midterms:

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### ➔ Share accurate information

Ensure accuracy by lining up expert impartial voices. Don't inadvertently spread disinformation (more guidance is available from the *Center for Journalism & Democracy Democracy Toolkit* on how to identify disinformation without amplifying it). Follow up on stories about election challenges or fraud claims with robust coverage of the resolution.

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### → **Connect the dots**

Help audiences understand the links between abuses of power that silence participation or target the political opposition and more direct attacks against voting and fair elections. As the above report shows, these are all a part of an integrated strategy, and the public and key officials will be best prepared if they understand it as such.

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### → **Avoid false “both sides” framing**

“Both sides” framing suggests there may be some merit to false or unlawful claims. Be straight with audiences when a politician says something that is demonstrably false, or directs or proposes an unlawful action.

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### → **Shed light, not fear**

Resist doomerism and share stories about what’s working. Highlight officials and individuals who are doing the right thing and protecting the law. Make clear why those engaged in election manipulation are unlikely to get away with what they’re attempting and how, if we all play our roles, we can safeguard our elections.

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# Election Officials and State and Local Leaders

## ✓ Prepare now for likely threats

Our election systems are run by all 50 states; the key actors are local, county, and state election officials. They will face enormous coercive pressure from Trump's allies within the federal government. To be prepared, election officials and state and local officials at every level should get smart on the legal landscape and threat environment. They should make concrete plans for what to do to uphold the law as different scenarios unfold. And they should strengthen networks and build solidarity with other election officials and civic leaders in their communities and states — and beyond — before the pressure arrives.

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### → State and local election officials and local law enforcement can plan for likely election threats

State and local election officials and local law enforcement should ensure they understand proper procedures and what the law requires — and have a plan in place ahead of time for responding to threats.

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### → Municipal and civic leaders can coordinate networks

Municipal and civic leaders can build strong local networks — including local law enforcement, municipal permitting offices, and other relevant actors — so that if coercive federal action comes (e.g., what was threatened in Minnesota or the Fulton County raid), the response is coordinated.

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### → All officials can build bipartisan support systems

All officials should connect with counterparts, including across the aisle where possible, so they can support each other when pressure comes.

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# Private Sector and Civil Society Leaders

## ✓ Speak out and organize

Election professionals and state and local officials serve as the front lines in defense of our elections. But to succeed against the threats they will face, they need to know that the full scope of civil society and the broader public will have their backs if they follow the law and do their jobs. Major institutions outside of government have significant leverage and a responsibility to use it. When civil society actors signal clearly — before a crisis arrives — that they will not acquiesce to abuses of power and election subversion, it changes the political calculus for officials who might otherwise feel isolated.

The key function of these civil society actors is to ensure that officials are encouraged to do the right thing and supported when they do. When there is visible, credible, broad-based civil society support, attacks become more difficult and our electoral institutions are better able to hold.

Leaders of all types can collaborate to support effective election administration and protection.

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## ➔ **Civil society leaders can educate citizens and empower communities to safeguard elections**

Civil society leaders from across sectors can educate people about relevant deadlines, voting options, and how elections are administered. They can host community events with election officials to demystify the process and share information to prepare people for long lines and delayed results. They can also train their members to understand and document illegal practices, help voters resolve questions and disputes, and prepare to support grassroots activism and peaceful protest in support of election officials who come under pressure.

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→ **Business leaders can leverage their influence to champion free and fair elections**

Business leaders, including small businesses as well as major employers, can publicly affirm their commitment to free and fair elections, provide accurate information about elections in employee and corporate communications, and work together with industry associations to plan for communications to defend our elections. They can also develop plans with partners in their cities and sectors to reach out to key officials about the importance of upholding the law and protecting elections.

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→ **Universities, foundations, and nonprofits can utilize their expertise to expose threats to election integrity**

Universities, foundations, and nonprofits can speak out with accurate information, provide research and legal support, and help document and expose threats to electoral integrity.

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→ **Unions, scientists, healthcare providers, and veterans can mobilize their diverse networks**

Organized labor, scientific experts, healthcare providers, and veterans each bring unique credibility and reach. Unions can mobilize workers around their right to participate in the political process. Scientists and healthcare providers can counter disinformation with trusted, evidence-based voices. Veterans and military families, who have sworn an oath to defend the Constitution, carry particular moral authority in pushing back on any effort to use military force or imagery to intimidate voters or coerce election outcomes.

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→ **Faith communities can reinforce democratic values**

Faith communities can reinforce the norm — with their members and the broader public — that democratic participation, following the law, and fair elections are non-negotiable community values.

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# Legal Community

## ✓ Ensure the justice system upholds the law

Every procedural checkpoint in our legal system is a potential line of defense against election subversion. And leaders of the bar as well as participants in the legal system have an opportunity and responsibility to provide accurate information and to seek to uphold the law and our Constitution.

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### → Legal professionals can provide expertise and support to local election protection efforts

Legal community members can participate in local election protection efforts, speak out publicly when the law is being abused, provide support for attorneys and officials under pressure, and help coordinate legal responses to election-related threats as they emerge. They also can defend attorneys and officials who face retaliation for doing their jobs.

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### → Grand juries, career prosecutors, and magistrates can reject improper investigations and prosecutions

Grand juries and career prosecutors can — and should — refuse to indict when charges are brought for pretextual or politically motivated reasons targeting election officials or voters. Magistrates asked to sign warrants can scrutinize requests carefully and decline to rubber-stamp legally deficient or politically motivated warrant applications.

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### → Judges can resist external pressure

Judges in emergency litigation are often the last line of defense when election subversion efforts move fast. Judges who receive emergency filings related to elections should apply the law rigorously and resist pressure, political or otherwise, to rule in ways that undermine legitimate election results.

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# We the People

## ✓ Actively participate in democracy

Ultimately, it is the American people who have the power to ensure that our elections are free and fair, and follow the law. From participating in civic life, to exercising our rights, to lending support to officials in difficult circumstances, all of us have critical roles to play.

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### → Counter disinformation — and help others do the same

The administration's Deceive strategy depends on confusion and disempowerment. Individual people who share accurate information, refute disinformation, and help explain how elections actually work are a direct counter to that strategy. Consider joining a community organization that educates and mobilizes citizens.

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### → Strengthen your community connections

Through your neighborhood, workplace, profession, or civic associations, you can be a force multiplier helping to build the kind of broad, visible institutional support that protects election officials who are doing their jobs.

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### → Volunteer as an election worker

In most communities, there are opportunities to serve as a poll worker. It is a tangible, patriotic contribution to the health of our democracy — and a chance to see firsthand how well our system actually works when people show up to run it.

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### → Be prepared to mobilize peacefully

There may be moments in the coming year when officials or institutions face intense pressure to violate the law or subvert election results. If so, peaceful, visible public action may be essential. When people come together in sufficient numbers to defend democracy and uphold the law, it works.

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# Together, We Can Protect Democracy

**THERE ARE OTHER KEY** actors in our system beyond those described here — including Members of Congress and the Supreme Court — who may ultimately have a say in whether our elections follow the law. But whether those actors do the right thing will depend, in no small measure, on what the rest of us do first.

If the public is informed, officials are supported and prepared, civil society is standing firm, the legal community holds the line, and Americans show up — as voters, as volunteers, as protesters — then by the time any dispute reaches Congress or the courts, the facts will be unmistakable: Trump and his allies will be asking them to do something plainly preposterous to overturn a legitimate result. That is a very different situation from a cloud of manufactured uncertainty in which a compliant Congress or Court feels that they have the space to do the wrong thing.

“ The administration is counting on our silence, our confusion, and our despair. None of us need to do everything. All of us can do something.

The administration will pursue its plan to **Deceive, Disrupt, and Deny** in order to interfere in the 2026 election. Yet this is not a story that ends in the upending of lawful elections — unless we decide it does. American democracy has survived attempts to subvert it before because enough people in enough key roles chose to do their jobs, follow the law, and refuse to be intimidated. That is what we need to do now. No single person needs to be a hero. But together — journalists who tell the truth, officials who hold the line, civic institutions that organize and speak out, lawyers who defend the law, and citizens who show up — we are more than enough.



Protect Democracy is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing American democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government.

[protectdemocracy.org](https://protectdemocracy.org)