

# What Threats Are Our Elections Up Against?

Threats to election integrity aren't just "politics as usual," they directly dilute young people's political power. When our elected officials and public servants target the U.S. election process, they fracture Gen Z's perceptions of election outcomes, and constrict young Americans' ability to influence policy and choose leaders that represent them.

Awareness of what's at stake is a meaningful first step toward overcoming these threats. This section gives you the TL;DR on the risks our elections face from 2026 onward. Use this breakdown for your campus, your group, or other Gen Z communities. For a deeper dive into the Trump administration's plan to interfere with the 2026 election and how to fight back, check out Protect Democracy's latest [Executive Override report](#).

## Free and Fair Elections: What Does It Mean?

Free and fair elections ensure that every eligible voter can participate without interference and that every vote is counted accurately. This means voters can cast their ballots safely, election systems are secure, clear rules are applied consistently, and results are respected and certified according to the law. When these conditions are met, people have real power to shape their government. When they are undermined, public trust and participation can break down.

## Threat 1: Deceive, By Promoting Election Disinformation

The goal of this threat is simple: erode confidence in the 2026 midterms (and beyond) by flooding the zone with lies and disinformation. Here's how this plays out:

- **Manufacturing Fraud:** Federal agencies create the appearance of election fraud out of thin air. An example of this is a [January 2026 FBI raid on a Georgia election office](#) based on false conspiracy theories.
- **"Noncitizen" Voting:** Public officials share false claims that noncitizens are "stealing elections," even when audits indicate that [noncitizen voting is very rare](#).
- **Gutting Security:** The administration gets rid of election protection and security infrastructure, like the [FBI task force tracking foreign influence](#).

## Why this hits Gen Z harder

Young people are chronically online, which makes us more susceptible to disinformation campaigns. AI-generated deepfakes and false information can lead to greater mistrust of institutions, political candidates, and public officials. Less trust in our elections = less voter turnout from Gen Z.

## Threat 2: Disrupt, Through Manipulation and Intimidation

This threat aims to (1) scare people into not voting, and (2) change election rules to make it harder for Americans to vote. Some ways this administration is doing this:

- **Targeting Critics:** The federal government investigates and prosecutes political opponents, journalists, nonprofits, and nonpartisan election officials to silence them and create a “chilling” effect on free speech.
- **Voter Intimidation:** The administration threatens to put ICE agents or federal law enforcement at polling locations to scare and discourage immigrants and people of color from voting.
- **Rule Manipulation:** The Executive Branch forces the passage of proposed laws like the SAVE Act, or uses Executive Orders to create strict ID requirements that could block millions of eligible Americans from voting, including young people whose student IDs may not qualify.
- **Accessing Voter Rolls:** Authoritarian efforts have targeted state voter rolls to scrutinize and potentially restrict who can vote. The Department of Justice has requested sensitive voter registration data from states, and in some cases, shared it with federal agencies like the Department of Homeland Security to run citizenship checks through the SAVE system. Many states pushed back, raising concerns about voter privacy and state authority over elections. The SAVE system has also incorrectly flagged eligible voters, putting students, naturalized citizens, and young voters at risk of being wrongly targeted, removed from voter rolls, or discouraged from voting.

## Why they're going after the youth vote

Youth and student organizing poses a real threat to authoritarians trying to concentrate power. Some of the [most effective opposition and pro-democracy movements](#) have been led by youth organizers.

Young voters are more likely to be students living on campus or frequent movers. [Stricter ID laws and changes to residency requirements](#) specifically target the flexibility young people need to vote. This is by design — introducing confusing, restrictive, and constantly changing policies discourages young people from voting. And efforts to detain, intimidate, and arrest Gen Z activists, students, and young migrants are part of the same playbook.

### Polling Site Intimidation

On Election Day 2024, voters nationwide reported to Generation Vote that they faced long lines, polling place delays, machine malfunctions, and confusion fueled by misinformation. Some polling sites opened late, ran out of ballots, or experienced technical failures that disrupted voting. Reports also documented voter intimidation, aggressive electioneering, violent threats, and other forms of harassment that made it harder for people to vote safely and confidently.

These challenges were especially significant for student voters. At campuses including Florida State University, the University of Texas, Binghamton University, Arizona State University, and others, students faced multi-hour lines that caused many to leave without voting due to class or work. In some cases, students were wrongly challenged on residency, denied provisional ballots, or given incorrect voting information.

Together, these incidents highlight real and ongoing barriers at the polls, and underscore the need for strong election protection efforts to ensure every eligible voter can cast a ballot freely and have it counted.

## Threat 3: Deny, By Rejecting Election Results

This threat is all about what the administration could do to reject election results and overthrow them. Here's how this could go down:

- **Seizing Voting Machines:** Federal agents could take voting machines or ballots on election night, which stops the count and messes up the election certification process.
- **Encourage Refusal of Certification:** Since the 2020 election, a growing movement of election deniers has tried to get local officials to refuse or delay certifying election results, even though it's required. What started with false claims of a "stolen" presidential election has continued into certification disputes in the 2022 and 2024 election cycles. After the January 6th insurrection, some election deniers even ran for — and sometimes won — local election administration positions to gain more influence over how elections are run and certified.
- **Congressional Intervention:** The administration may turn to allies in Congress to manipulate election procedures through pressure, or even threats of violence. As a result, Congress ultimately refuses to seat legitimately elected members.

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### Why Gen Z is in the crosshairs

Gen Z isn't opting out of the system yet, but young people have consistently felt deeply dissatisfied with the state of U.S. democracy. Our elections to date have all been free and fair, but that hasn't stopped Gen Z from [believing that democracy isn't working well for young Americans](#).

Election denialism could be the nail in the coffin, meaning "game over" for U.S. democracy as we know it. If the winners are chosen by the people in power instead of the voters, why should young people bother to vote? Why should anyone, for that matter?

## So, What Can We Do?

Now that you're aware of the different kinds of threats our elections face, it's go-time. The table on the next page offers a visual summary of some ideas for concrete actions (with links!) your organization or group can take to help move the needle toward a more responsive democracy — and this toolkit is full of dozens more.

 **Tip:** Don't stop here. Check out the other sections of this toolkit for more links to take action way beyond just casting a ballot! Want even more? Get regularly updated suggestions for ways YOU can protect democracy [here](#).

## Actions You Can Take



### Educate & Activate

Send the [Voter Journey Map](#) to your friends, family, and community members!

Create a curated [reading list](#) of resources and books on democracy, authoritarian threats, and historical activism to share with young people for context and inspiration ahead of the midterms.

Work with others to organize a [voter registration drive](#) on campus, in your neighborhood, or online.



### Show Up

Make sure your [voter registration](#) is up to date.

[Report voter intimidation or disinformation](#) when you see it.

Volunteer as a [nonpartisan election observer](#).



### Advocate & Support

Use resources like the [EAC Voter Education Design Toolkit](#) to create effective communication materials.

Find and join [peaceful protests](#) near you.

Help your community navigate barriers to voting, ex. setting up a [rideshare schedule](#) for those without transportation.