

Responding to Youth Voter Disenfranchisement

Not all threats to an election look like a stolen vote. Sometimes they show up as a lie designed to make you doubt what's true. Sometimes they show up as a policy that makes it harder to organize. Sometimes they show up as a person in a uniform standing nearby to intimidate you. These tactics follow a deliberate pattern that the current administration is using to undermine and control U.S. elections: Deceive voters with lies and disinformation, Disrupt the process through manipulation and intimidation, and if all else fails, Deny the results altogether.

This guide walks through some of the most common pressures young and student voters may face that threaten their ability to cast a vote or exercise their right to organize, and how to push back this election season. Each section, organized by category so you can jump to what's relevant to you, covers what the threats can look like, how they can escalate, and what you, your peers, and your organization can do about it — whether that's in the weeks leading up to Election Day, the day itself, or in the aftermath.

Misinformation & Disinformation

You've probably seen it before: a video, a post, a screenshot that seems too wild to be real, and it turns out it wasn't. Spreading lies and confusion, whether by mistake (misinformation) or on purpose (disinformation), is one of the easiest ways to make people doubt whether their vote counts, whether elections are legitimate, or whether it's even worth showing up. It's the Deceive piece of the playbook — flooding the internet with lies until no one's sure what to trust anymore. Especially for young voters, a generation that gets most of its news from social media, that confusion can lead to missed deadlines, distrust of legitimate results, or disengagement altogether. The good news is that spotting it gets easier with practice, and knowing what to look for is often enough to stop it from working on you.

How This Could Play Out

Understanding how misinformation and disinformation can show up is key to spotting it fast and stopping it from spreading further. Potential scenarios include:

- **AI-Generated Fake Footage:** This can range from a false audio clip claiming out-of-state students aren't legal residents of their campus's state and can't vote there — most states actually do allow it, but the claim can spread fast enough to cause missed deadlines before it's corrected — to a deepfake video showing student volunteers destroying ballots at a polling site, leaving the workers depicted facing harassment, doxxing, and possibly government scrutiny. AI-generated clips that should set off alarm bells are those that make viewers or listeners think an authority figure (like a governor, state attorney general, or secretary of state) is really speaking, even when that isn't the case.
- **Misinformation Spreading From Student Groups:** This can be as small as anonymous flyers circulating on campus, or a few campus chapters posting contradicting voting deadlines online, causing some students to miss their actual deadline while sorting out which one was right. It can also manifest larger, like a viral post falsely claiming out-of-state student votes "won't be counted this year" after a state changes its mail-in deadline — turning a rule change into a false alarm that spreads fast enough that some students decide not to bother voting absentee at all.

How Can I Help To Alleviate This Threat If I'm...

An Individual Student?

- **Pause before sharing anything that makes you feel shocked, angry, or panicked** — that reaction is often the whole point, since content designed to mislead usually works by triggering a fast, emotional response before you have time to think it through.
- **Before trusting a screenshot or a claim from social media, double-check voting deadlines and rules directly with your state or campus election office.** Information takes seconds to confirm. Check an official government website, or call or text the Election Protection hotline at 866-OUR-VOTE, so a rumor doesn't cost you a deadline!
- **Do not repeat false information** — even to debunk it. If you see viral content with false information — do not amplify. Posting or sharing accurate information with your community is a great response, but no need to give oxygen to the false info along the way. (Dig into the nerdy psychology on why this is important here).

A Young Organizer?

- **Verify anything before you post it, even if it's already been shared multiple times in your network.** A high share count doesn't mean it's true, and the more a claim spreads, the harder it becomes to correct once it's proven to be false. Check out [this resource on election misinformation](#) that gives examples on what to look out for.
- **If you spot misinformation spreading, report it directly on the platform where you saw it,** using this [cheat sheet](#) for platform-specific instructions. Then correct it for anyone who's already seen it, pointing them to a [trusted source](#) instead of just deleting or ignoring the post.

An Organization or Campus Chapter Leader?

- **Assign one person to post your organization's official voting information, so multiple people aren't posting conflicting messages.** The [EAC Voter Education Design Toolkit](#) has templates and best practices to help you build accurate materials from scratch. And the Center for Civic Design also has an awesome [messaging bank](#) with social graphics on how to respond to different scenarios.
- **Before any resources go out publicly, check dates and claims against other campus groups working on the same issue.** Posting conflicting information can make students wary of trusting election updates from your group going forward.

Additional Actions You Can Take

- **Get Election News You Can Trust:** Follow nonpartisan, election-specific outlets like [Votebeat](#) and [Bolts](#) so you're working with information from trusted sources.
- **Understand How AI Is Being Used To Mislead Voters:** The more you know about how deepfakes and AI-generated content spread, the faster you'll spot the next one.
- **Practice Media Literacy:** Slow down, check sources, and compare coverage across outlets. These habits get easier the more you use them.
 - [FactCheck.org](#), [PolitiFact](#), and [Snopes](#) are helpful fact-checking websites that can help debunk rumors and investigate election-related claims.
 - We also love this article from the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public that unpack [the 5 moves of misleading election rumors](#).

Campus Free Speech Around Electoral Organizing

Campuses have always been one of the most important places for students to organize and speak out. In recent years, many universities have made it harder for students and others to exercise their First Amendment rights, and pressure from this administration — including threats to freeze federal funding over campus activism — has accelerated the trend. Making it harder for real organizing to happen at all, as these restrictions do, is useful to the administration's Disrupt strategy. Facing new rules, extra hoops, or pushback from university admin can feel discouraging, but it's important to remember that student speech and organizing are protected activities, and knowing your rights is the first step to keeping your work moving forward.

How This Could Play Out

Understanding how these restrictions might show up is key to knowing your rights and responding quickly. Potential scenarios include:

- **Policy Restrictions on Your Organization:** Campus administrators have tightened (and may continue to tighten) rules around civic engagement activity — sometimes through blanket policy changes that force your group to scale back tabling, registration drives, chalking, putting up posters, or partner events, and in more serious cases, by revoking your registered student organization status entirely over your group's work. Losing that status cuts off funding, access to campus space, and your ability to recruit — right when students need that outreach most. Know that administrators generally can't deny your group recognition or funding at a public university just because they find your message controversial. And while a public university student leading organizing work has First Amendment protection, a private school student is subject to their school's own code of conduct (more on this, below).
- **Retaliation Against Individual Organizers:** This can range from individual pressure — a fellow hosting a nonpartisan voter registration drive getting emails from campus leadership signaling they're being watched, despite following every policy — to formal dismissal after outside political pressure frames an organizer's work as biased. In the most serious cases, this escalates to campus protests over First Amendment rights, with government officials going so far as branding the organizer's civic engagement work as "hate speech" or "propaganda."

How Can I Help To Alleviate This Threat If I'm...

An Individual Student?

- **Know what protections you actually have.** These resources from FIRE help break down what admin can and can't do under your school's speech codes, event policies, and disciplinary procedures, which vary a lot from school to school.
 - [FIRE's Guides to Free Speech on Campus](#)
 - [FAQ for Political Speech on Campus | The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression](#)
- **Keep a written record of every warning, meeting, or policy citation from campus administration.** Dates, names, and exact wording matter if you need to reference it later.

A Young Organizer?

- **Check whether your school is public or private before assuming your rights apply the same way.** The [NYCLU's guide](#) and [this FAQ from FIRE](#) walk through the differences. Remember that private institutions promise students free speech in their official policies, and they have an obligation to live up to those commitments. No exception for the election season!
- **Document everything in writing, and avoid agreeing to informal terms on the spot.** A verbal "understanding" likely won't hold up later, since there's no record of what was actually agreed to.

An Organization or Campus Chapter Leader?

- **Review [PEN America's Campus Free Speech Guide](#) for tips and case studies drawn from real free speech incidents at colleges nationwide.** Seeing how other schools' disputes played out can help you anticipate what your own administration might do. We also find their [tip sheet for student voting organizers](#) especially useful!
- **Get support early.** [FIRE's Campus Rights Advocacy](#) supports student groups denied funding or recognition over their views, students facing punishment for unpopular speech, and students denied due process.
- **Learn more about permissible political campaign-related activities and student rights.** This [issue brief from the American Council on Education](#) has valuable

information about voting and college political campaign-related activities this year. We recommend reading from page 8 onward so you can get smart, quickly!

 **Pop Quiz:** But don't worry — everything is open book! Many campuses have time, place, and manner restrictions for civic engagement activities. Organizations, chapter leaders, and organizers should familiarize themselves with their campus policies. If you're a part of a campus organization overseeing young organizers, it's important to help students understand campuses' individual policies before they potentially violate them. And if you disagree with some of the rules? Organize and dialogue to see if they can be changed!

Additional Actions You Can Take

- **Build Relationships Now:** Connect with a legal aid organization so you have support lined up if something happens, and build relationships with campus administrators who can be helpful partners!
- **Start a Student Defenders Group:** [FIRE's Student Defenders program](#) helps you build a peer-support network on your campus focused on due process and fair treatment, and may offer financial support to help get one started.
- **Stay Looped In With Other Campus Organizations:** Share what you learn with other student groups doing similar work — coordinated response is stronger than any one organization acting alone.
- **Explore Whether Your Campus Has a Nonpartisan Voting Coalition:** Many campuses have nonpartisan voting coalitions or student groups. Partnering with these entities can help young organizers attain greater access across campus and better understand the campus landscape.

Voter Intimidation by Local, State, or Federal Agents

You have every right to cast your ballot safely and freely. The presence of law enforcement near election spaces itself is not voter intimidation. However, it is crucial to remember that voter intimidation by any government agent is strictly illegal under federal and state law, and actual incidents remain rare. Being prepared by knowing the legal limits on government authority at the polls, and having resources on hand can

help you understand your rights, support your peers, and ensure your community can vote with confidence.

How This Could Play Out

Understanding how voter intimidation by government actors might manifest is key to identifying and resisting it. Although we hope this does not happen, potential scenarios include:

- **Local Law Enforcement and Campus Police:** An overbearing presence of local law enforcement or campus police may be intimidation designed to create a "chilling effect" around student polling places. Officers might set up conspicuous surveillance, conduct high-visibility vehicle stops along main voting access routes, or station themselves directly within prohibited perimeter zones. Keep in mind that some states require law enforcement at polling locations.
- **National Guard Deployment:** A high-visibility presence of militarized forces near polling sites or transportation hubs serving young and diverse communities can serve as an aggressive visual deterrent. Even if guardsmen are around for "traffic control" or "public safety," their presence near ballot drop boxes or polling lines can intentionally or unintentionally create a hostile atmosphere that makes voters feel unsafe or hesitant.
- **Federal Agents (ICE, DOJ, and DHS):** Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or Department of Homeland Security (DHS) vehicles could hover near campus polling places, stage visible law enforcement actions nearby, or spread rumors of citizenship checks to induce panic among naturalized, mixed-status, or minority student communities. Department of Justice (DOJ) personnel or unbadged federal officers acting outside standard legal observer protocols might aggressively monitor voter lines or demand to inspect documentation, exploiting authority to intimidate first-time and young voters.

 **Remember:** Federal law strictly limits the presence of armed federal forces or military at polling places. Voter intimidation by any actor is illegal. **In all three of the above scenarios you should report any such presence to the election protection hotline and local election officials.**

- Whether you're a student, organizer, or campus chapter leader, you can report instances of intimidation directly to the nonpartisan [Election Protection Coalition](#) at **1-866-OUR-VOTE**.

- For state-specific rules on law enforcement boundaries at polling locations, consult your state election authority through [USAGov State & Local Election Offices](#).

How Can I Help to Alleviate This Threat If I'm...

An Individual Student?

- **Vote early!** Make a plan to vote during the early vote window or early on election day — that way if the situation at your polling place makes you uncomfortable, you have options to return at another point.
- **Join your local election observer programs.** You can join by turning to trusted partners like the [League of Women Voters](#) and the [Election Protection Hotline](#).
- **Know what is legal, what is not, and what your rights are.** [Protect Democracy's Community Resilience in the 2026 Election report](#) has useful resources and summarizes what local, state, and federal agents are legally allowed to do.
- **Participate in voter accompaniment programs and buddy systems:** "Do you have your exit buddy?" –  *Finding Nemo*, 2003. In all seriousness, voting in groups or pairs makes it harder for anyone to be singled out, ensures concerned voters have support, and makes exercising your civic duty more fun!

A Young Organizer?

- **Volunteer as (and recruit) poll monitors.** Join nonpartisan voter protection programs like the [Election Protection Coalition](#) to serve as trained poll monitors who help identify and report intimidation tactics on the ground (bonus points if you can organize your peers to join you!)
- **Familiarize yourself with laws around and best practices for filming interactions with federal agents and near polling places if you are comfortable:** In addition to assessing your safety and what is legally allowed, use judgment about whether filming or photographing federal agents would escalate a situation and refrain from doing so in those circumstances.
- **If you're organizing actions, advocacy, and / or public communications on potential voter intimidation incidents in your community, read [OverZero's Messaging Guide on Voter Intimidation](#):** The [guide](#) has helpful recommendations and tips for organizers to consider when publicly communicating about voter intimidation.

An Organization or Campus Chapter Leader?

- **Understand university and campus police practices around nearby polling locations, and community dynamics:** Every campus is different, understanding the relationships between campus police, school administrators, election officials, and local police can help with assessing and pre-bunking potential concerns students may have about voting in person in advance. ***Some questions that may be helpful to run down answers to:***
 - Does ICE have a presence in my community?
 - Would local law enforcement cooperate with federal agents in my community?
 - Are university, college, and campus leaders aware of student concerns about voter intimidation from government and non-government actors? Do they have policies in place around how they would (or would not) support students facing voter intimidation at campus precincts or other polling locations?
- **If affiliated with a state or national organization with a presence on multiple campuses, reach out to headquarters with questions and for resources:** This establishes closer lines of communication, and you can get more support and encouragement when reporting incidents of voter intimidation via the [866-OUR-VOTE Hotline](#) or otherwise. Additionally, getting in contact can be helpful should there be a need to coordinate legal or other kinds of support for students facing voter intimidation, violence, deportations, etc.
- **With organizations like Donuts + Democracy, ALL In Campus Democracy Challenge, host trainings, panels, campus conversations, or other kinds of events to educate students on their rights and how they can vote safely:** Helpful trainings could center on de-escalation, Know Your Rights, and election volunteering opportunities. ***Some ideas you can consider for potential speakers:***
 - Election officials
 - Previous poll workers (bonus points if they are or were a fellow student!)
 - Staff from nonpartisan pro-democracy and student vote organizations
 - If you are affiliated with a state or national organization, someone from headquarters
 - Campus administrators well-versed in student voting

 **Tip:** Make sure your student government shares accurate information and resources with the student body. Your chapter or organization can be especially helpful to student government as they work to communicate across campus. You get a gold star if you ask your student newspaper to run an issue focused on safe student voting, amplifying training opportunities, and the [866-OUR-VOTE Hotline](#) — and more extra credit if you ask your college radio station to do the same!

Additional Actions You Can Take

- Engage your community wherever they are: Talk to rotary, book clubs, local YMCAs, and other local clubs about the importance of voting and to share voting information.
- Participate in a [Project HALO](#) event, [Souls to the Polls](#), or any other event where your community is voting together.
- Make plans to go vote with your neighbor, friends, family members and provide support if they are unsure about their voting plans.

Other Potential Scenarios (and What You Can Do)

Beyond campus free speech, voter intimidation, and mis- and disinformation incidents, there may be other kinds of situations you and your peers find themselves in this election season. Below, you'll find some more examples of scenarios that may apply to you, and what you can do in response.

On or Leading Up to Election Day, What Do I Do If...

My Campus Precinct Is Relocated To An Area Far Away?

- **Vote Early or by Mail:** If traveling to a distant location on Election Day poses a challenge, students can explore early voting or absentee ballot options depending on state eligibility guidelines.
- **Coordinate Rideshares:** Student organizations can establish carpools, shuttle routes, or group transit trips to get voters to off-campus polling locations safely. Raise the issue with your student government and ask for support with

coordination or funding rides to the polls. Also, check out [Rideshare2vote](#) for an example of an established program in your state!

- **Organize Voting Groups:** Utilizing a "buddy system" helps students navigate new or unfamiliar polling sites together. If you are in a club or on a sports team, coordinate a time to vote together after a meeting or practice.
- **Report Site Access Issues:** If a sudden relocation creates barriers to voting, students can contact trained volunteers via the nonpartisan [Election Protection Hotline](#) at 1-866-OUR-VOTE.

➡ I Am (or a Friend Is) Experiencing Delays With Receiving Absentee Ballots?

- **Track Your Ballot:** Did you know that there are several vote-by-mail trackers you can use to keep tabs on your ballot? Treat your ballot like a package you're returning and regularly check a ballot tracker for status updates to make sure it'll arrive on time. We've linked several trackers below:
 - [Rock The Vote | Make Sure Your Vote Gets Counted](#)
 - [BallotTrax](#)
 - [Ballot Tracker Tools | Vote.org](#)
 - [Was My Ballot Counted? | U.S. Vote Foundation](#)
- **Vote In Person:** In many jurisdictions, voters who requested an absentee ballot but did not receive it can vote in person. Local procedures vary — some locations issue standard ballots after the voter signs an affidavit or cancels the unreturned ballot, while others provide provisional ballots to ensure no duplicate vote occurs. If you are concerned about your absentee ballot call your local election office or voter protection hotline to make a plan.
 - **For those studying abroad, in the military, etc.** who face severe mail delays, emergency tools like the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB) may be available as outlined via the [U.S. Federal Voting Assistance Program](#).
- **Organize Rides to or Communications With Local Offices:** Arrange transportation for peers who need to go to a local county election office or early voting center to resolve ballot issues or cast in-person replacement ballots, or support peers in contacting local offices about issues with their absentee ballots.
- **Share What You Have Learned:** If structural issues are causing delay in the return of your ballot, others in your community are likely impacted as well. Use your voice

to share the information you have learned and ensure that others are able to have their vote counted too.

➡ Registrations Are Getting Canceled Without Me or Other Voters Finding Out?

Note: While extremely unlikely and highly illegal, the following guidance walks you through how to respond to this unique scenario in case it ever comes up, not because we expect it to happen. The good news is, as of September 2026, we're NOT seeing any evidence or data indicating that voter registrations are getting canceled, and we're already inside the 90-day window before the election, when federal law prohibits systematic voter list purges. There's no need for you or your community to let this keep you up at night.

- **Check Status Frequently:** Encourage students to routinely verify their voter profile weeks ahead of deadlines using official lookup tools available through the [U.S. Election Assistance Commission](#) or state voter portals.
- **Watch for Mail Notices:** Federal law under the [National Voter Registration Act \(NVRA\)](#) generally requires election officials to send confirmation notices before removing anyone from the rolls. Students should monitor both their campus mailboxes and permanent home addresses for official election mail.
- **Re-Register Immediately:** If a registration shows as inactive or canceled, re-registering before the state's registration cutoff is the fastest fix. State-by-state registration portals can be accessed via [TurboVote](#).
- **Utilize Same-Day Registration:** In states that permit Same-Day Voter Registration or Election Day Registration, students whose names do not appear on the voter roll can register and cast a ballot on the spot at designated polling locations or early voting sites.
- **Cast a Provisional Ballot:** If a registration error cannot be resolved at the polling place on Election Day, voters have the right to request a provisional ballot. Election officials will verify eligibility post-election before counting the vote, however, provisional ballots often require follow up steps to be counted. Ask carefully what steps you must take to ensure your provisional ballot is actually counted and make a plan.
- **Run Campus Verification Drives:** Student groups can set up "Check Your Status" tables in high-traffic campus areas to help peers catch cancellations well before registration deadlines.

- **Report Unlawful Purges:** If you hear of any registered voter whose registration is canceled during the 90-day window, report the issue immediately to nonpartisan volunteers at [1-866-OUR-VOTE](tel:1-866-OUR-VOTE).

➡ I'm Experiencing Hostility From Election Workers or Volunteers?

Note: This is another extremely unlikely scenario. Not all heroes wear capes — election workers truly are heroes doing a very hard job in especially difficult circumstances this year and will be super excited to help you vote and answer any questions. The following guidance will help you in the rare event you encounter a volunteer or someone at your polling site that's giving you or others around an extra hard time.

- **De-escalate and Stay Calm:** Avoid aggressive arguments. Hostility often aims to provoke a reaction or discourage voters from staying in line. Reiterate calmly that you are an eligible voter seeking to cast your ballot.
- **Ask to Speak with a Lead Inspector or Chief Judge:** Every polling site has a designated lead election official or chief judge responsible for managing site operations and resolving disputes. Ask the poll worker to escalate your issue directly to the precinct supervisor.
- **Demand a Provisional Ballot as a Last Resort:** If an election worker refuses to issue a standard ballot, federal law grants you the right to request a provisional ballot.
- **Request Written Instructions:** Poll workers are required to provide written documentation explaining how to follow up and verify if your provisional ballot was counted.
- **Call Nonpartisan Legal Hotlines Immediately:** If an election worker or volunteer is acting inappropriately, refusing access, or making hostile demands, step out of line (or remain in line while calling) to report the behavior to trained nonpartisan volunteers using the [Election Protection Hotline](#).
- **Document the Incident:** Note the time, poll worker name or badge number, specific statements or actions made, and the exact precinct location. Share these details with hotline advocates so they can escalate the complaint to local election administrators or county clerks.
- **Send Student or Youth Observers:** Youth or student groups can assign volunteers to stand outside the legal perimeter zone to observe polling line conditions, guide peers to legal resources, and assist anyone who runs into challenges inside.

➔ I Notice a Longer Term Need For a Campus Polling Location?

- **Socialize the Idea and Work With Supporters:** Partner with student government associations, campus organizations, and school administrators to garner support for new campus polling locations.
- **Petition Local Election Officials:** Identify the county board of elections or local clerk responsible for designating polling locations. You can then schedule meetings to present data on student population size, registration density, and transit barriers to demonstrate the necessity of an on-campus site.
- **Look for Suitable Locations:** Work early in the semester to identify accessible spaces (such as student unions or recreation centers) that meet official space, parking, and security requirements, and present those options to local election authorities.
- **Report Access Barriers:** If distance or lack of access prevents eligible students from voting, consult trained volunteers through the Election Protection Hotline at [1-866-OUR-VOTE](tel:1-866-OUR-VOTE) to explore emergency remedies or legal support.

A DEMOCRACY FOR ALL GENERATIONS

Preparation doesn't have to = paranoia

Preparing for election threats can easily feel overwhelming, and it is completely normal to feel a spike in anxiety when discussing barriers to the vote. However, taking proactive steps isn't about bracing for catastrophe—it's about building quiet confidence and community resilience. Preparation can transform uncertainty into clear, actionable power so you and your peers can navigate Election Day safely.