

A New Narrative for American Democracy



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About Issue One

Issue One is the leading cross-partisan political reform group in Washington, D.C. We unite Republicans, Democrats, and independents in the movement to build an inclusive democracy that works for everyone and fix our broken political system. We educate the public and work to pass legislation on Capitol Hill to bolster U.S. elections, strengthen ethics and accountability, increase government transparency, and reduce the corrosive influence of big money in politics. Issue One's ReFormers Caucus — made up of more than 200 former members of Congress, governors, and Cabinet officials — is the largest coalition of its kind ever assembled to advocate for political reform. Our National Council on Election Integrity is the leading bipartisan voice on protecting elections and combating efforts to undermine our democratic process.

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About Civic (Re)Solve

Civic (Re)Solve is a holistic, cross-cutting, 10-year democracy campaign that works to build diverse and enduring civic capacity in communities throughout the United States. A thriving, multi-racial democracy holds space for diverse political perspectives and strengthens the ability to solve problems collectively. Through its 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) pooled funds, Civic (Re)Solve develops lasting and collaborative relationships with highly effective practitioners and advocates working to drive greater equity and justice for all Americans.

An invitation: How to use this report

While it is our hope that this report provides new and meaningful guidance for practitioners in the pro-democracy movement, it doesn't stand on its own. It builds on the considerable work of a number of Issue One's key partners, including the Democracy Communications Collaborative, More in Common, and Voting Rights Lab. And just as is true with so much of their important work, the best application of this report will be guided by the ideas, insights, and life experiences brought to these pages by the people in the trenches who are doing the work. We invite you to incorporate our findings — whether word for word or in your own way — into the work you do every day.

The new narrative project

In the run-up to the 2020 elections, American citizens, organizations, and institutions from across the political spectrum came together in an unprecedented effort to push back on election disinformation and ensure the presidential contest was decided fairly and accurately. Issue One was proud to be part of that effort. We established the National Council on Election Integrity (NCEI), a bipartisan group of national government, political, and civic leaders united around defending the legitimacy of our free and fair elections. Anchored by the NCEI, we launched the \$15 million Count Every Vote campaign to push back on election disinformation, ensure that the election was not decided until every legal vote was counted, and protect the peaceful transfer of power — a hallmark of our nation's great democratic experiment.

Thanks to the efforts of so many, democracy survived its gravest challenge in generations.

But as anti-democracy forces seized on disinformation to justify an unprecedented assault on our elections, it was clear that the threat was just beginning.

Introduction

Since January 2021, 18 states have passed 34 laws that would restrict voting, and in 2022 alone, 27 states have proposed at least 148 election interference bills that would affect how elections are run or how results are determined.¹ Some make it harder for certain voters and communities to cast their ballots, while others make it easier for partisan legislatures to intervene in and overturn elections and penalize election officials for good faith job performance. Sowing doubt about the democratic process has become an article of faith for a proliferating number of candidates and elected officials across the nation.

At the same time, a decentralized media environment has allowed disinformation and conspiracy theories to spread widely and take root. It's no wonder 70% of Republicans do not consider President Joe Biden the legitimate winner of the 2020 election², while 47% believe that a time will come when "patriotic Americans will have to take the law into their hands."³

Standing in the breach are the remarkable group of women and men across the country who administer and staff our elections. They are our neighbors, our friends, and trusted community members who want the same things we all want — safe, secure, fair elections where the will of the voters is accurately reflected in electoral results. In 2020, more than 10,000 of them conducted the safest, most secure election

1. Brennan Center for Justice: [Voting Laws Roundup](#), May 2022
2. Greenberg, Jon. [Most Republicans still falsely believe Trump's stolen election claims. Here are some reasons why.](#) Poynter, June 2022.
3. Haltiwanger, John. [Nearly half of Republicans say 'a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands,' new poll shows.](#) Business Insider, July 2021

in our nation's history, accurately counting the ballots of a record-breaking 158.4 million votes while in the middle of a global pandemic.⁴ These heroes and heroines overcame unprecedented challenges to protect the freedom to vote and secure the foundation of our democracy, but we cannot expect them to continue to carry this burden alone.

Issue One is one of the many state and national organizations leading the fight to protect our election workers, secure the freedom to vote, strengthen our elections, and stop partisans from overturning the will of the people. This work is crucial for the 2022 and 2024 elections and beyond.

This report is part of a broader Issue One initiative aimed at developing a new narrative about American democracy, one that offers an aspirational and powerful story that can reach beyond coastal bubbles, speak directly to the hearts of everyday Americans, and reinvigorate values that transcend the hyperpartisanship of our current politics.

None of this will be accomplished overnight — progress toward a more perfect union will be

measured in years, not weeks or months. We hope “A New Narrative for American Democracy” makes an important contribution to building a better America.

Methodology

To produce this report, Issue One first partnered with Civic (Re)Solve, a founding supporter and strategic partner in our Count Every Vote Campaign, and GMMB, a leading strategic communications firm. We then enlisted four innovative public opinion research and message development firms — [Artemis Strategy Group](#), [Avalanche Insights](#), [Citizen Data](#), and the [Neimand Collaborative](#).


We chose these four research partners for a reason. While there are a number of terrific researchers at work today, we wanted to take an unconventional approach in an effort to break new ground, avoiding a more typical 400-person sample that explores a relatively narrow and predetermined set of issues and produces findings that replicate those which have come before. Artemis, Avalanche, Citizen,



4. Desilver, Drew. [Turnout soared in 2020 as nearly two-thirds of eligible U.S. voters cast ballots for president](#), Pew Research Center, January 2021.

and Neimand have differing processes and approaches (which we have accounted for when interpreting the data they produced), but they are all comfortable straying from the traditional model, working with much larger sample sizes (including voters and non-voters), and emphasizing qualitative approaches that try to get at the underlying motivations, values, and feelings that determine behavior — rather than letting our (the client/the researchers) assumptions on the front end shape outcomes.

In February 2022, Avalanche fielded a survey of more than 10,000 respondents aimed at helping us establish a baseline understanding of America's relationship with its democracy. In March and April, Artemis followed with a survey of more than 6,000 respondents exploring whether, and by what means, Americans could be moved to support efforts that would strengthen democracy.



“What we found was a people deeply wedded to the country they love and profoundly dispirited by the democracy that lies at its core.”

In April, building off the findings of the Avalanche and Artemis surveys, Citizen launched a survey of 1,000 registered voters to “explore attitudes and test messaging around election integrity.” Also in April, Avalanche fielded a second survey of 9,699 respondents designed to offer a more in-depth look at the perceptions Americans have about democracy, and to test values-based narratives and messages aimed at helping to shape those perceptions. In May, Neimand developed a messaging architecture based on all research conducted up to that point. This and other messages and language were then tested

in a final Avalanche survey of 9,988 respondents in June as well as four focus groups conducted by Citizen Data in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. All research findings are available at <https://issueone.org/narrative>. We then worked with GMMB to synthesize the data; identify key insights, learnings, and messages; and develop this report.

What we found was a people deeply wedded to the country they love and profoundly dispirited by the democracy that lies at its core. We also found that this need not be a permanent condition. There is a way out of this mess. The path we found is detailed in the pages to come.

Americans love their country, but harbor deep concerns about their democracy

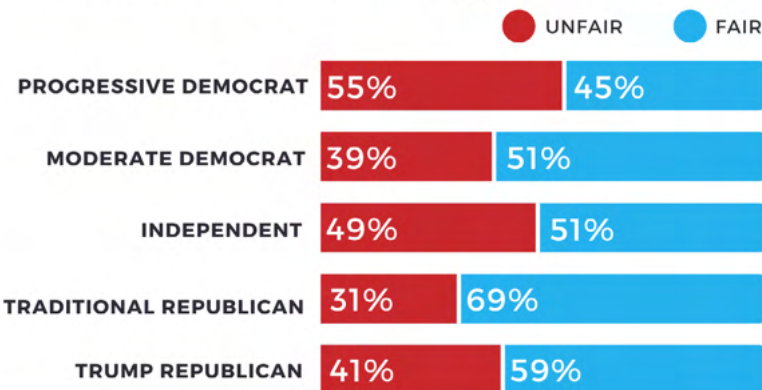
In general, Americans feel good about their country. According to research conducted by More in Common in 2020, for example, around 7 in 10 Black, white, and Hispanic Americans feel proud to be American. A June 2021 poll showed that 85% of Americans consider themselves (very or somewhat) patriotic, including 89% of white Americans, 77% of Black Americans, 83% of Hispanic Americans, and 75% of Asian Americans. In our research, a majority of those surveyed use words like “free,” “independent,” and “strong” to describe this country. These feelings are shared across the political spectrum: Trump voters, older voters, and white people are the most likely to express positive sentiments about America, with Biden voters, women, and people of color not far behind.

A majority of Americans also consider life in America to be fair, though the finding is not monolithic. Perception of fairness in America increases with age, with respondents aged 35 and up all saying America is fair, but those under 35 saying it's not. Men are more likely to say life is fair than women and gender nonconforming respondents. A majority of white Americans and Asian/Native Hawaiian-Pacific Islanders say life is fair, while a majority of Hispanic and Black Americans say it's unfair. Among ideological groupings, Republicans, moderate Democrats, and Trump Republicans are the most likely to say life is mostly or always fair in the U.S., with progressive Democrats the only ideological grouping more likely to say it isn't fair than that it is.

To be clear, that a majority of Americans feel that America is fair does not mean they are feeling particularly optimistic about the direction of the country, or that they are free of concerns about things like inflation, crime, or political divisiveness. Many are wrestling with deep and complex feelings about the difficulties they are experiencing and who might be to blame. But while those feelings are undoubtedly connected to the perceptions of democracy detailed later in this report, they do not appear to have implicated the broader affinity people have for their country or the values they associate with the American experience.

Similarly, there remains near universal recognition that participating in the American

How fair is our way of life in the United States right now?





**4 out of 5 Americans
are concerned about
the state of democracy**

political process is important. Large majorities of Americans (95%) say it is important to have the freedom to vote, and significant majorities say that it's at least "somewhat important" that everyone does so. A majority of Americans also report that they are likely or definitely going to vote in their upcoming state or local elections (71%), the midterm federal elections (70%), and the 2024 presidential election (77%).

At the same time, 4 in 5 Americans express deep concerns about the state of their democracy. Those who are most concerned tend to be older, white, and self-identify as "upper class." Notably, strong Trump voters are far and away the most likely to say they are "very concerned" about the state of their democracy.

For many, worry has turned to disenchantment. According to research Helm conducted earlier this year, only 36% of Americans view democracy very positively, and over 50% of people under 40 are open to non-democratic systems of government. This is despite the significant impact many Americans believe a healthy democracy can have on their lives. When our democracy works, a majority of Americans believe it is at least "somewhat true" that everyone can have a fair shot in life. But without a democracy that

works, a near-majority of Americans say that it is "very true" that our children's future will be in danger (and a significant majority believe that this is at least "somewhat true").

So how did we come to a place where Americans feel good about America, and overwhelmingly assign significance to not only voting but to a working democracy, while at the same time harboring such deep misgivings about how their democracy works?

There are a lot of answers to that question, some of which range outside the parameters of the research Issue One set out to do. But at the center of our findings are perceptions of a democracy that has somehow become disinterested, unresponsive, or even hostile to the voice of the people.

In other words: a democracy that doesn't feel very democratic.

***"Americans feel good
about their country and
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Americans."***

Four key ways Americans believe they are being failed by their democracy

There are many ways people express their misgivings about American democracy. We've grouped some of the most recurrent themes into four buckets described below: representation, trust, fairness, and declining confidence in the two-party system.

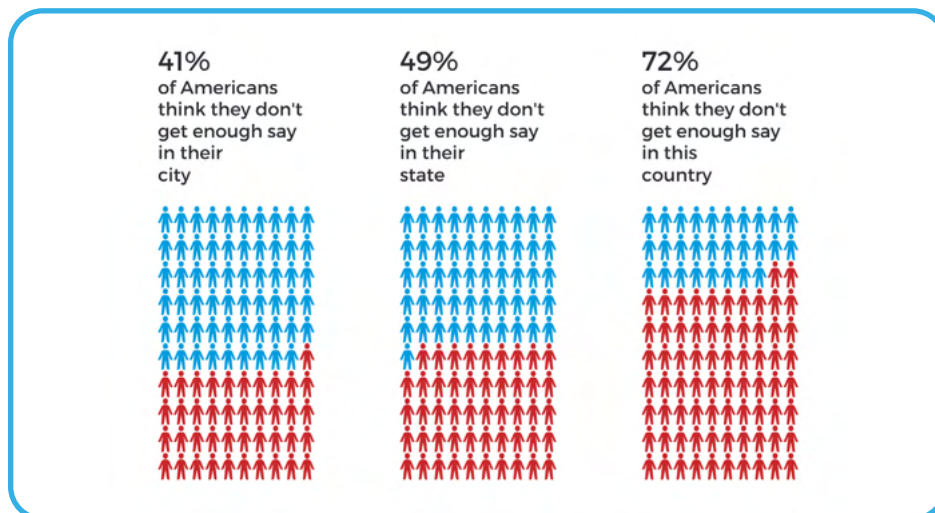
Representation

Many Americans have come to believe that their voice is not represented in our democracy. Majorities of voters across the ideological spectrum say, for example, that citizens do not get enough say in the governance of the country. Less than 50% of Americans are confident that electoral outcomes actually reflect the will of the people, a sentiment that is more pronounced on the ideological right. And more than 4 in 10 Americans say American democracy does not represent them.

Trust

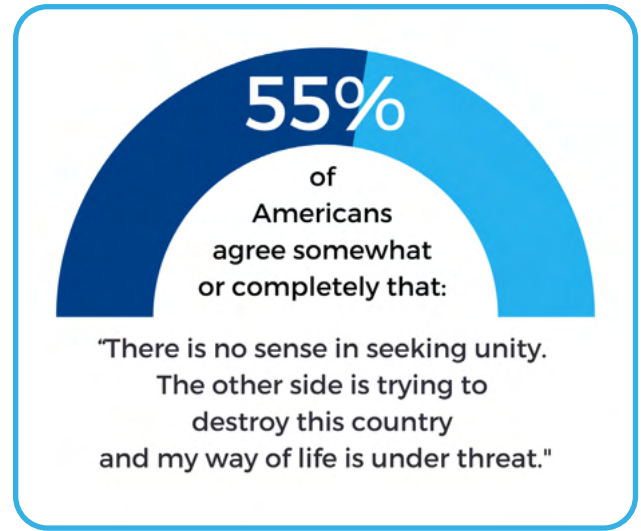
Across the focus groups we conducted, voters expressed deep concerns about whether they could trust some of the basic building blocks that help support the American way of life: the media, government institutions, politicians, and even their fellow citizens. The same holds true when it comes to democracy. More than half of Americans say their trust in our elections has at least somewhat declined over the past ten years. In some cases, trust, or the lack thereof, tracks with partisanship, and gets more pronounced at the electoral wings. About half

of Republicans report a significant decrease in trust, for example, but that number jumps to 84% with Trump supporters. Just 11% of Democrats say their trust in elections is in decline; 51% of those located in the Democrats' progressive wing say the same.



Fairness

Big majorities of Americans (88%) agree that fairness should be at the heart of our electoral process — a sentiment shared pretty evenly across both parties, including the left and right wings. However, clear majorities express deep, and sometimes dark, concerns about whether our elections are, in fact, fair. Fifty-five percent of Americans at least “somewhat” agree (and about 20% “agree completely”) that our elections will never be fair, that it is more important for “their side” to win and to protect “their way of life,” that the “other side” is trying to destroy the country, and that “my way of life is under threat.” These sentiments are felt most acutely among Trump Republicans.



Declining confidence in the two-party system

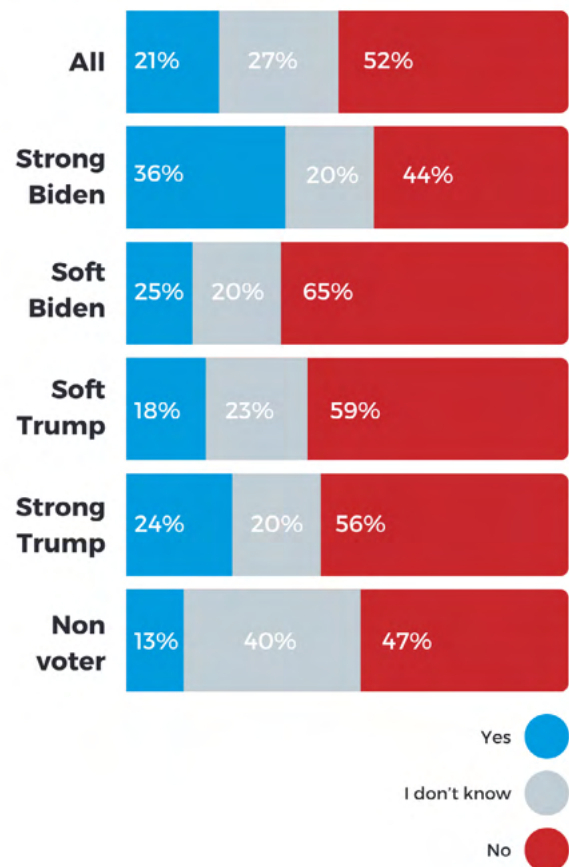
Our democracy and its operations are deeply intertwined with those of the two main political parties. However, many lack confidence in the two-party system.

Sixty-nine percent of Americans identify with one of the two main political parties. This is not a monolithic split; there are ideological divisions within each party. Thirty-eight percent of Democrats, for example, identify as “progressive,” while the remaining 62% describe themselves as “moderate.” Forty-eight percent of Republicans say they are “traditional Republicans,” while 52% say they are “Trump Republicans.” And only 19% of Democrats and 17% of Republicans say they are strongly affiliated with their party, leaving a majority of the electorate somewhere in the middle.

Most Americans say the two-party system isn't working for them, with those most likely to say so occupying the middle of the ideological spectrum. Those expressing dissatisfaction are more likely to be older, male, and white than Black, Latinx, or Asian American Pacific Islander (though Native American or Alaska Natives are the most likely to say so). On the socioeconomic spectrum, only those who identify as “upper class” express satisfaction with the two-party system (57%). Majorities of everyone else say it doesn't work for them. A chief complaint about the two-party system is the polarization and divisiveness that comes with it.

This does not necessarily mean partisan identification is on the decline. On the contrary, party affiliation is on the rise overall, most significantly among Trump Republicans. Of note: traditional Republicans are among those most likely to report a decrease in party identification.

Is the two party system working for you?




There is a path forward

While there are a variety of reasons Americans may feel disenchanting with their democracy, one thing most can agree on is that we should do something to fix it.

This raises an urgent question for those actively engaged in reform efforts: Are there fixes that can garner sufficient support among the American electorate to navigate our fractured political system and achieve implementation?

When seeking to make change, one impulse might be to start with the people most energized to do so, the ones who require no convincing to join the fight. The problem is that in this case, those people are located disproportionately in the party wings, the most polarized sectors of the electorate. And when they think about why democracy doesn't work better, the first thing they do is point fingers at each other.

This sharply different perspective is reflected in the reforms preferred by the wings as well. For example, those on the left wing may be more likely to prioritize measures that make voting more accessible, and stopping lawmakers from overturning election results, while those on the right may be more focused on preventing ineligible voters from casting a ballot and subjecting reported results to a higher level of scrutiny.



“While there are a variety of reasons Americans may feel disenchanting with their democracy, one thing most can agree on is that we should do something to fix it.”

Would it be possible to take the ideas of one wing and convince the other to support them? Or to stitch together the ideas that drive each side into something coherent? Maybe. But it's the wings (and particularly those on the right) who are most likely to harbor the notion that the other side isn't just trying to win elections, but is instead set on destroying "this country and my way of life." These are hardly the conditions most fertile for compromise or for finding common ground.

Issue One and Civic (Re)Solve believe we have found another way, a path to reform that starts in the middle — or rather, the "movable middle." So when we talk about specific reforms (later in this report), we prioritize those that hold the most salience for this cohort of voters.



To be clear, we are not suggesting that the only concerns that matter are those of the ideological middle. Nor do we suggest that only the reforms preferred by the middle are of merit; nor that it is the people in the middle who have been disproportionately disadvantaged by inequities in the democratic process.

To the contrary, efforts to disenfranchise people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, and those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum — and the myriad ways our political system has marginalized their voices — are perhaps the most significant failure of American democracy, and its darkest stain. And when people are asked today why they don't feel represented by their democracy, many are likely to sound themes of gender, race, and class exclusion, and understandably so.

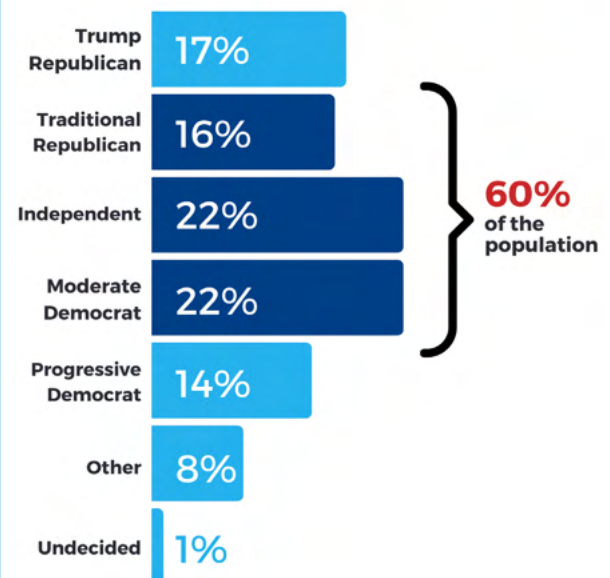
It is to America's great benefit that so many organizations and advocates are hard at work on important projects designed to address the injustices detailed in the previous paragraph. We believe in their efforts and, as organizations, are deeply committed to lifting the voices of those who have been historically excluded, as well as holding accountable those peddling conspiracy theories and/or violating democratic norms, laws, and institutions. But, that is not the focus of this report. This report is about finding a way forward that can attract a majority of people from across the political spectrum to a pro-democracy effort they can see themselves in, and that can thereby secure democracy for everybody.

That's why we start with the movable middle.

Made up of moderate Democrats, independents, and traditional Republicans, these voters

may be less engaged in the discussion about our democracy than their fellow citizens on the wings, but they are also more open to agreement about how to strengthen it. That's important because activating these voters can provide not just an avenue to consensus, but also to implementation — the movable middle isn't just a slice of the electorate, it's an electoral majority.

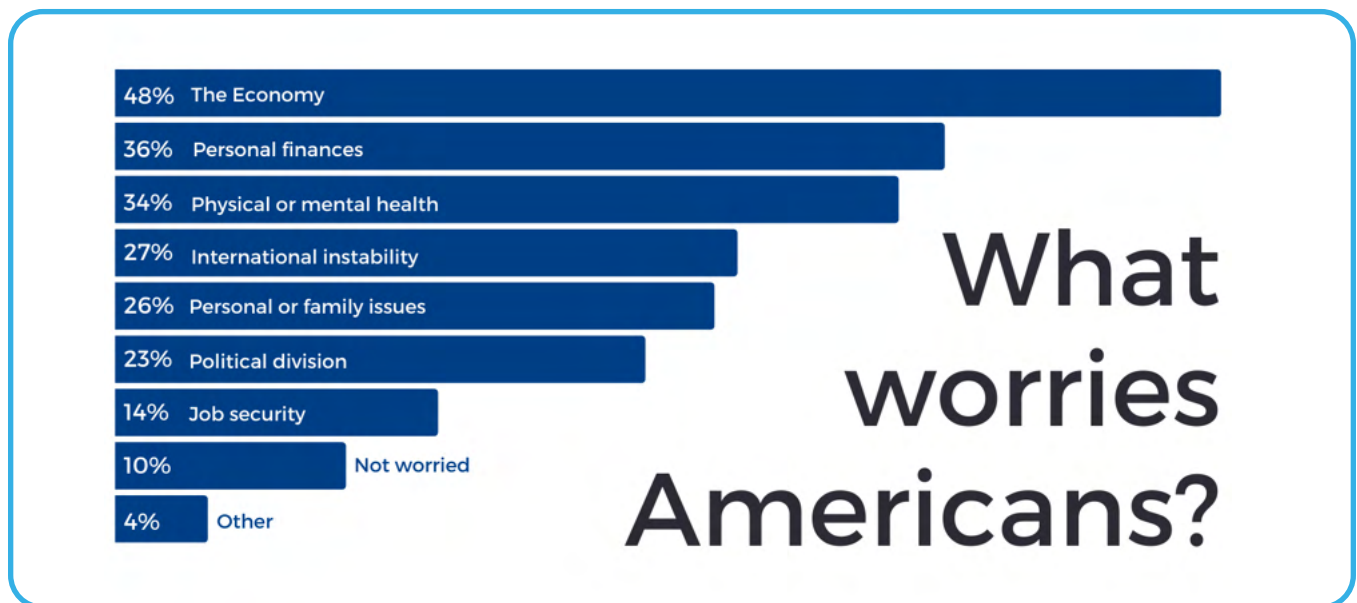
Path to reform: The Movable Middle



Finding the America of our aspirations

When you think about why people are motivated to participate in a “pro-democracy” movement, it isn’t (for example) born of an academic interest in how democracy works, or the pursuit of reform for reform’s sake. For some, it’s rooted in a worry that authoritarianism is on the rise in America, and that they stand to lose cherished rights and a way of living they are deeply invested in if these developments go unchecked. For others, the perceived threat may be very different, but the stakes are the same.

The movable middle doesn’t see it that way. In fact, while those on the wings have all the motivation they need to wrestle over the shape of our democracy, voters in the middle are worried about other things (like rising food prices and the economy). So even if they can come to agreement on a common set of reforms, a question remains: What will motivate them to take action?



According to our research, if we want this cohort to pursue pro-democracy election reforms, we can’t just talk in platitudes or history lessons, or simply describe the desired reforms over and over again and hope our targets get the message. Instead, we have to help the people we are asking to do the political work make the connection between implementing reform and achieving the America they desire. That means telling a bigger story.

Moving the movable middle along the path to reform

Over the course of our research, we tested a variety of messages (and reforms — see below) in an effort to see what could help galvanize the movable middle to action. Here's what we learned:

- Freedom and fairness need to be at the heart of any messaging program aimed at the movable middle. The messages most likely to motivate the movable middle to support election reforms are those centered on freedom and fairness, framing reforms as a means to protect the freedom to vote and as a way to ensure that our electoral processes are fair. Freedom and fairness are key. These are also core American values.
- Be forward-looking — looking backwards and relitigating past elections doesn't work. We need to offer a forward-looking set of reforms that instill confidence about the next election. Continuing to talk about the “Big Lie” only gets in the way of unifying people around improving our democracy in the future.
- Help people feel like they have agency over the problem — talking about threats to American democracy can feel like a problem too big for anyone to solve. For the movable middle, it's better to offer clear, simple, commonsense reforms, and call the movable middle to act on them.

The four messaging pillars

When thinking about how to message to the movable middle, we start with four messaging pillars:



We discuss each one below.

1. Frame reforms as a way to protect the freedom to vote

Americans believe that people should have the freedom to vote for their representatives and that we all should have an equal say in how our country is governed, no matter who we are, what we look like, or what we believe. This is a core belief and one that is widely shared. Messaging that frames reforms as a way to protect the freedom to vote is met with strong agreement among the movable middle, is the most likely to trigger activating emotions — inspiring a sense of hope and community — and provides the most convincing reasons to take action (particularly among those who occupy the movable middle's leftward flank). For example, language like the following can help prime movable middle voters to support reform:

"Right now, our democracy is under threat and politics is so divisive that it can be hard to see a way out. Some cynical politicians and special interests want to keep it that way so they can hoard power — leaving the rest of us with even less say in how things are run. But even though we may not agree on much right now, we all believe in an America where every person has the freedom to vote for who represents them — where people have an equal say in how we are governed, regardless of our skin color or how much money we make."

There is a lot to talk about in a paragraph like that (including how the threat is characterized; see below), but the larger point is this: When messaging makes reference to protecting the freedom to vote, it enhances the likelihood that the movable middle will take action. So, we should do that.

Of course, those seeking to undermine democracy also have messages that can shape how the movable middle understands the freedom to vote. The idea that politicians have corrupted our democracy by allowing just about anyone to cast a ballot, for example, rings true for many Americans. Similarly, the idea that measures implemented to make it easier to vote have instead polluted the electoral process with fake ballots, thereby diluting the voices of those who are actually qualified to participate, resonates. At bottom, these are arguments meant to reframe what the freedom to vote means in a way that limits freedom.

All of which means: we need to not only make the connection between our preferred reforms and protecting the freedom to vote, but to also win the debate over who gets to define what the freedom to vote means, to whom it applies, and what we need to do to protect it.

This is a battle we cannot afford to lose.

2. Make sure the movable middle understands how commonsense reforms will lead not only to fairer elections but to a fairer country

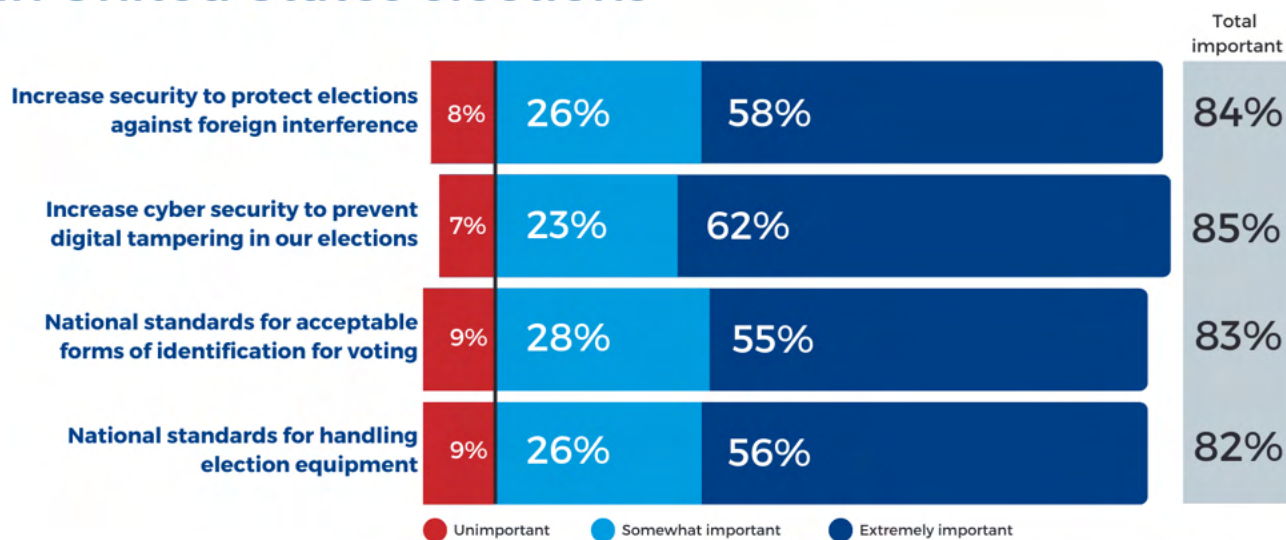
As noted earlier in this report, there are a variety of ways that Americans express concern about the fairness of American elections. By and large, they don't feel represented by our democracy, and they don't trust it or feel like electoral outcomes reflect their will. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, many Americans, including the movable middle, respond well to reforms that promise to make our elections more fair.

The movable middle's interest in enhancing electoral fairness is bigger than just elections. Rather, they see fair elections as the foundation for the kind of America where they would like to live.

A majority of the movable middle agrees with the assertion that "fair elections are the cornerstone

of our strong country," and that fair elections are a necessary predicate to an America where everyone "has the freedom to pursue their own interests and a community to share life's moments with." Movable middle voters believe that fairer election laws and processes will lead to more equality, less polarization, and a society that is healthier, wealthier, and safer. More than just words, these are the kinds of perceived benefits that can motivate voters to undertake sustained action. Particularly given the enthusiasm gap between middle voters and those on the wings, understanding how to connect specific reforms to these kinds of broader benefits, emotions, and values is immensely important. That's why messages that center on fairness will be so important to

Election reforms for greater fairness in United States elections



Respondents were asked: "How important would you say each of the following initiatives are when it comes to obtaining greater fairness in the U.S. today?"

getting the movable middle in motion. Here's an example of how to do that:

America works best when we have voting laws and processes that make sure both sides play fair. There are simple, commonsense things we can do to ensure our elections do right by everyone and everybody can accept the outcomes... Fairness in elections will lead to a fairer and stronger country, one where all Americans can shape their lives, advance their livelihoods, build community, practice the faith of their choice, and find happiness. That's how democracy works best for all of us.

Fairness also features prominently in opposition messaging. Suggesting an election has been stolen, won by fraudulent means, or decided by ballots cast by unqualified people — all of that is designed to make voters who believe they followed the rules and would have won if others

did the same feel as if the electoral process has been unfair to them. The sense among Trump voters that they were treated unfairly in 2020 is part of the emotional cocktail that drives so much of their engagement today. And if elections are being conducted in a way that people believe is unfair, that is a prime justification for anti-democracy forces to push for laws that make it harder for eligible voters to vote and easier for partisans to take over elections for partisan political gain.

Here again we find ourselves in a battle we cannot afford to lose. It's critical that we offer the movable middle reforms that help guarantee elections that are fair, and offer messages that help them connect the dots between election reforms and the broader vision of the America they would like to see.

3. Look forward rather than relitigating the past or casting blame

There can be a tendency among those worried about the state of American democracy to try to convince others that the election system is working well and the 2020 election was decided fairly. Don't do it. It's a wasted effort, and it often makes things worse. Especially for the hardcore, election denial is now an article of faith, without regard to the facts or the messengers who deliver them.

Over the course of our research, we tested a variety of messages. One of the least convincing contained reassurances that "when there is fraud" in American elections, "we catch it, prosecute it, and punish the violators," that various experts have characterized the 2020 election as "the most secure in the history of our country," and that "any fraud that occurred [in 2020] was minor and had no impact on the results of the election." All of that may be true, but it was the least likely message to evoke agreement from the movable middle,

did markedly worse among the independents and traditional Republicans who comprise an important part of the movable middle, and elicited the most angry responses from the movable middle. Look forward; don't look back.

In a similar vein, it can be tempting to assign blame to or villainize those we perceive as undermining democracy on the right or the left. For example, in the section above that talks about the freedom to vote, we could have started our illustrative paragraph with something like, "Donald Trump and his followers have taken an authoritarian turn, and are trying to twist democracy to their own ends." One reason we didn't is because it's not an effective message for the voters who are the subject of this report. Casting blame and pointing fingers may energize the wings, but it's too political for the movable middle, which they can find alienating. We shouldn't do it.

4. Empower people to take action

A lot of the talk about democracy these days can take on an apocalyptic tone, and the solutions can feel abstract and remote. That may be an accurate expression of how the wings assess the stakes and what we need to do, but it's discouraging to the movable middle. A better path for this audience: acknowledge the challenges we face, but then offer a set of simple, concrete, commonsense steps that can help inspire confidence in upcoming elections and the results they generate and that we can achieve in the near term if we take action now. And yes, we should ask people to act — people find it empowering when we show them what needs to be done, help them understand how we get there, and then ask them to demand the change they want.



Message Principles — Do's and don'ts

The following do's and don'ts aren't intended to be prescriptive, nor do we recommend trying to cram every "do" into every message. Instead, we offer the below as broad guidance about how to talk to the movable middle about democracy and the wide range of issues the topic involves, as well as some pitfalls to avoid.

Do's

- **Do use messaging that is forward-looking, aspirational, hopeful, and inclusive**

Rather than looking backwards, focus on how forward-looking reforms can help achieve an America that works better for all of us.

- **Do talk about "simple," "practical," and "commonsense" reforms**

Talking about how to save democracy can feel overwhelming. Use language that helps the movable middle to understand that making change is achievable.

- **Do root efforts to strengthen elections in broader American values**

Reforms are more likely to gain purchase among the movable middle if we connect them to the larger values they hold dear.

- **Do acknowledge people's doubts and distrust**

It's ok to acknowledge that people have real doubts about our elections, and that there are things we can improve (like increased federal funding to local and state elections to implement changes voters want). Use questions as an invitation to offer commonsense ways concerns can be addressed.

- **Do arm people with information to combat false narratives**

While we don't want to look backward and relitigate the past, it's important to educate people to see the difference between unintentional and insignificant errors in the system and false claims of widespread conspiracies about voter fraud.

- **Do demystify and offer transparency into the electoral process**

One thing that helps fuel our opponents' arguments is how little people understand about how our elections actually work. We should change that. Showing people how elections really work can help defang disinformation.

- **Do ask voters to play a role**

Asking people to take action is empowering and inspires activating emotions, like hope.

Election workers are key

At a time when the national conversation about our elections is increasingly shrill and suffused with conspiracy theories and animosity, one group of Americans whose reputations have not yet been tainted by the rhetoric is election workers.

For example, one of the messages that tested best over the course of our research was:

"We cannot allow dedicated election workers and civil servants to feel unsafe and unprotected. Democracy is not possible without public servants who can freely and fairly administer elections."

One in three Americans surveyed put this message at the top of their list, and six in ten rated it highly. Election workers are our neighbors and co-workers, the dad your kid carools with to soccer practice, the mom you see Saturday morning at the youth hockey game. Messaging about keeping election workers safe, and about the significant role they play in protecting democracy and administering free and fair elections, can help reframe the debate away from wild conspiracies and instead put a human, sympathetic face on the electoral process. They are our best, most trusted messengers, and we should elevate them.

(Note, this may help explain why Americans are more likely to have confidence in state and local elections than national ones: the human element of a local election may engender a kind of trust that is harder to feel about an unknown (national) system, the workings of which may be harder to understand.)



Don'ts

- **Don't go on the attack**

When we attack or impugn the motives of those who doubt the integrity of the 2020 election, or engage in an us vs. them mentality, it only fans partisan flames and alienates the movable middle. While many leading election deniers are using it as a cynical political ploy, the majority of Americans who doubt our elections do not have malicious intentions.

- **Don't relitigate 2020**

Trying to convince people that the 2020 election was decided fairly won't work. We don't need people to agree with us on whether the past election was decided fairly; we need to explain how elections work and enact measures that will further protect our elections and increase their trust in the next one.

- **Don't talk about the "Big Lie"**

Talking about the "Big Lie" gives oxygen to claims of cheating or voter fraud and locks us into an adversarial, blame-casting posture, rather than one that might breed consensus.

- **Don't let claims of voter fraud enable voter suppression**

We need voters to feel confident that our election system is fair and free, but we can't allow measures aimed at making it harder to vote to be implemented in the name of a baseless fraud narrative/disinformation.

- **Don't frame the debate in apocalyptic terms**

When we couch the challenges facing our democracy in apocalyptic terms, it plays to the wings but shuts down the middle down.

- **Don't project doom and gloom**

Voters already have negative impressions about democracy and feel demoralized about elections — hyping up their fears and misgivings can perpetuate harmful ideas and keep people from looking ahead to what's next. It's important to create urgency, but people shouldn't feel like we are inches from going off a cliff.

- **Don't be dismissive of concerns about democracy that may feel smaller in scale**

While most of the media coverage in the democracy space focuses on the "Big Lie" and election denialism, most concerns expressed about our democracy are on a smaller scale (if still fueled by disinformation), like people voting twice. Providing concrete, commonsense, forward-looking responses to these kinds of concerns can go a long way.

- **Don't center your argument on unity**

According to our research, a majority of people no longer think unity is possible in the U.S., and don't see achieving unity as a predicate to supporting reforms that would strengthen our democracy. That doesn't mean we should abandon any messaging about reducing polarization. But don't make the bar higher than it needs to be by adding admirable objectives that aren't necessary to what we are trying to do.

- **Don't talk about election integrity in a way that suggests a political or partisan bias**

If we talk as if one side holds the higher ground than the other, we'll never find our way to consensus. Remember that our audience isn't the leaders of the "Stop the Steal" effort, but rather everyday voters who have doubts and concerns.

- **Don't make the entire story about election workers**

We love election workers! They are an important part of the story, and the best messengers we have. But we also have to deliver other kinds of messages that help elicit activating and hopeful emotions from our targets.

- **Don't talk about one-off reforms**

Given the ideological differences of the demographics that make up the movable middle, offering one-off reforms is less likely to garner majority support than a thoughtfully constructed package of reforms offered together.

Election concerns are not always about conspiracies and "the Big Lie"

When Americans are asked what worries them about election security, here's what they say:

- Some votes not getting counted and ballots getting lost in the mail
- People voting twice because they didn't know if their absentee ballot was counted
- People voting who either no longer live in the U.S. or who are now deceased
- How money and funding sways elections
- Healthcare workers filling out ballots on behalf of people who are unable to make up their own minds
- Error in the "digital" aspects of elections
- Votes being suppressed
- Manipulation of votes
- Sensationalist ads, fake information, and fear-mongering
- Human error
- Long lines at polling stations where voters can't access water

How to talk about...

The freedom to vote...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We all believe in an America where every person has the freedom to vote for who represents them, and where people have an equal say in how we are governed — regardless of our skin color, how much money we make, or where we live.
Fair elections...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fair elections are the cornerstone of our strong country, one where every American can shape their lives, advance their livelihoods, build community, practice the faith of their choice, and find happiness.
Why democracy matters...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When our democracy works, every person can have a fair shot in life.• Without a democracy that works, our children's future is in danger.• Without a democracy and political system that works, we can't address the many pressing issues facing our country.
Characterizing the threat...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our democracy is under threat and politics is so divisive that it can be hard to see a way out.• Some cynical politicians and special interests are working to keep it that way for partisan gain.• They want to prevent eligible voters from freely casting their ballots, and are working to change the laws so they can overturn elections in their favor instead of letting the people decide.• It leaves the rest of us with even less say in how things are run, and puts our children's future at risk.
Helping the movable middle understand what we can do about it...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are simple, commonsense things we can do to ensure our elections do right by everyone and give us quick, accurate results.

Reforms to lead with when talking to the movable middle...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules to stop politicians and big corporations from buying the results they want. • Rules to stop politicians from overturning election results they don't like. • Fair voting laws that make sure everyone eligible to vote can — and anybody ineligible can't. • Increasing security to protect elections from digital tampering and foreign interference. • Better ways of labeling and preventing the spread of disinformation in media and online. • Better training and protection for local election workers.
Enlisting the movable middle to action...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are the kind of simple rules and reforms most Americans can agree on. • It's up to us to demand the changes we need and to support leaders who will fight to make sure our elections are free, fair, and secure. • If we succeed, we can be confident in the fairness of our elections and keep America working for all of us.
Describing election workers...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use words like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nonpartisan • Neutral/impartial/unbiased • Neighbors • Friends • Fair • Patriotic • Honest • Community members • Citizens • Dignity • Safety • Support • Respect
The 2020 election...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be careful here – avoid the temptation to relitigate the past: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>We all want to make sure we have the safest, most secure election system in the world. There are commonsense laws and processes we can enact to make sure every eligible vote is freely cast and fairly counted.</i>

Frame

Taking all of our research and recommendations together, a core frame for a pro-democracy message aimed at the movable middle could sound like this:

We believe in an America where every citizen has an equal say in how they are governed. That's what our democracy is supposed to be about, but it only works when we have voting laws and processes that make sure our elections are free and fair, and everyone can accept the results. The good news is that there are simple, commonsense best practices we can adopt that will ensure that every American can participate in our elections and that both sides play fair. Increasing security to protect elections from digital tampering and foreign interference. Better training, supervision, and protection for local election workers. Fair voting laws that make sure everyone eligible to vote can — and anybody ineligible can't. Rules to stop politicians from overturning election results they don't like and to stop big corporations from buying the results they want. But it won't just happen — it's up to us to demand these and other changes. If we don't step up, nothing will get better. But if we do, we can have a fairer and stronger country where all Americans have a chance to shape their lives and live according to their values, pursue their livelihoods, build community, and find happiness. That's the promise of America, and we know how to get there.

Voting Rights Lab

In early 2022, Issue One was honored to partner with the Voting Rights Lab along with Protect Democracy, Secure Democracy USA, and Every Eligible American to explore the challenges our democracy faces and what we can do to get back on track. This research was conducted in large part to counter efforts to both undermine access to voting and empower partisans to take over elections in state legislatures across the country. One leading insight we found: it is important not to gloss over the challenges we face or to pretend they don't exist. Instead, it can be helpful to acknowledge the situation within a message frame, and then pivot to the affirmative vision for our

democracy that resonates with voters and increases trust in elections. We can admit that the system is a work in progress, but also highlight the fact that this has always been the case, and part of what makes America special is that throughout our history we have marched forward in the quest to make our country work for everybody. From expanding voting access to women and people of color to securing equal rights for all no matter their religion, gender, educational background, or zip code, America can keep moving forward if we elect leaders who want to improve our country, not tear it down, and who pick country over party and people over politics.

The road ahead

All of which brings us to this: are there specific reforms that would strengthen our democracy around which the movable middle could be organized? That is part of the critical work that lies before all of us in the pro-democracy movement, and one that will only be answered by the combined efforts of the many dedicated organizations working tirelessly in this space. Below is what our research discovered about a number of policy options. Please note: these are offered not as a definitive path, but rather to illustrate how we can improve our collective communications around our respective policy priorities.

Top-testing issues for the moveable middle

As noted earlier in this report, when Americans think about how they want our political system to work, a lot of them think about it, at least in part, through either a freedom and/or a fairness frame. They want freedom and fairness to animate our system, and when democracy works, we expect it to lead to a fairer, freer society, one where each of us has more of a say. Of course people want their candidate to win, but they also want to know that the electoral process was one in which both sides played fair, and where everyone was free to have their say.

Of course, many Americans believe that our electoral performance has fallen behind our aspirations for a free, fair, and just society, especially in areas that can be characterized as having to do with voter process and voting laws. What kinds of things fall into those categories? Many Americans would feel better about our elections if they felt like there were effective laws enforced to protect the freedom to vote, reform how our campaigns are financed, and increase security. They also want to be sure that every eligible voter has a chance to vote and that everyone's vote will be accurately counted, that our elections can be protected from outside and/or foreign interference, that politicians can't change the results just because they don't like them, that we all have access to trustworthy news sources, and that local election workers are nonpartisan, trained, and safe.

Happily, there are electoral reforms that speak directly to these kinds of concerns. As noted earlier, while there may be significant divergence in those reforms preferred by the wings, there is more consensus in the middle.

Increasing cyber security to stop digital tampering, for example, is near the top of everyone's list (including those in the wings).

There is also broad support among middle voters for increasing security to protect against foreign interference. A third reform—adopting national standards or best practices for elections, including requiring some form of identification and uniform processes for handling election equipment—ranks among the top five priorities for traditional Republicans, and is considered more fair than having uneven standards across states by 73% of moderate Democrats and 65% of independents; a finding like this stands out not only for its popularity, but for the bipartisan nature of its support. (It is worth noting that some of these reforms, such as requiring some form of voter identification, are also supported by leading progressive Democrats like Leader Stacey Abrams.)

Other issues that our research shows may have particular appeal to movable middle voters include:

- Prevent state lawmakers from overturning election results
- Protect local election officials from any interference or harassment
- Make voting options equally accessible across all 50 states
- Laws to ensure that only people who are legally allowed to vote actually vote
- Increased transparency measures like enabling people to look up their vote on a database to check that it has gone through and updating vote counts online in real-time
- Greater protection against intentional disinformation in the media
- Increase cybersecurity to prevent digital tampering
- Stronger civic education to teach the next generation the importance of fairness in society and elections

Conclusion

In sum, our research suggests there is a way to both marshal broad support within the movable middle and take meaningful steps towards rebuilding trust in our elections and strengthening the democracy that is so quintessential to American life.

But that is hardly the end of this conversation. There is more research to do. Deeper dives to be had in specific universes of voters. Work to do with partners to create, test, and share creative. Training to launch. And, in addition to passing meaningful reforms, it is imperative that Congress give significant, predictable, regular funding for state and local elections.

To inform that process, we hope you will visit <https://issueone.org/narrative>. There you can find all the research that informed this report. Use it. Question it. Challenge our assumptions. Draw your own conclusions. All of our work will be made better by yours and where you take it. We can't wait to see what you do.

America needs you now more than ever.