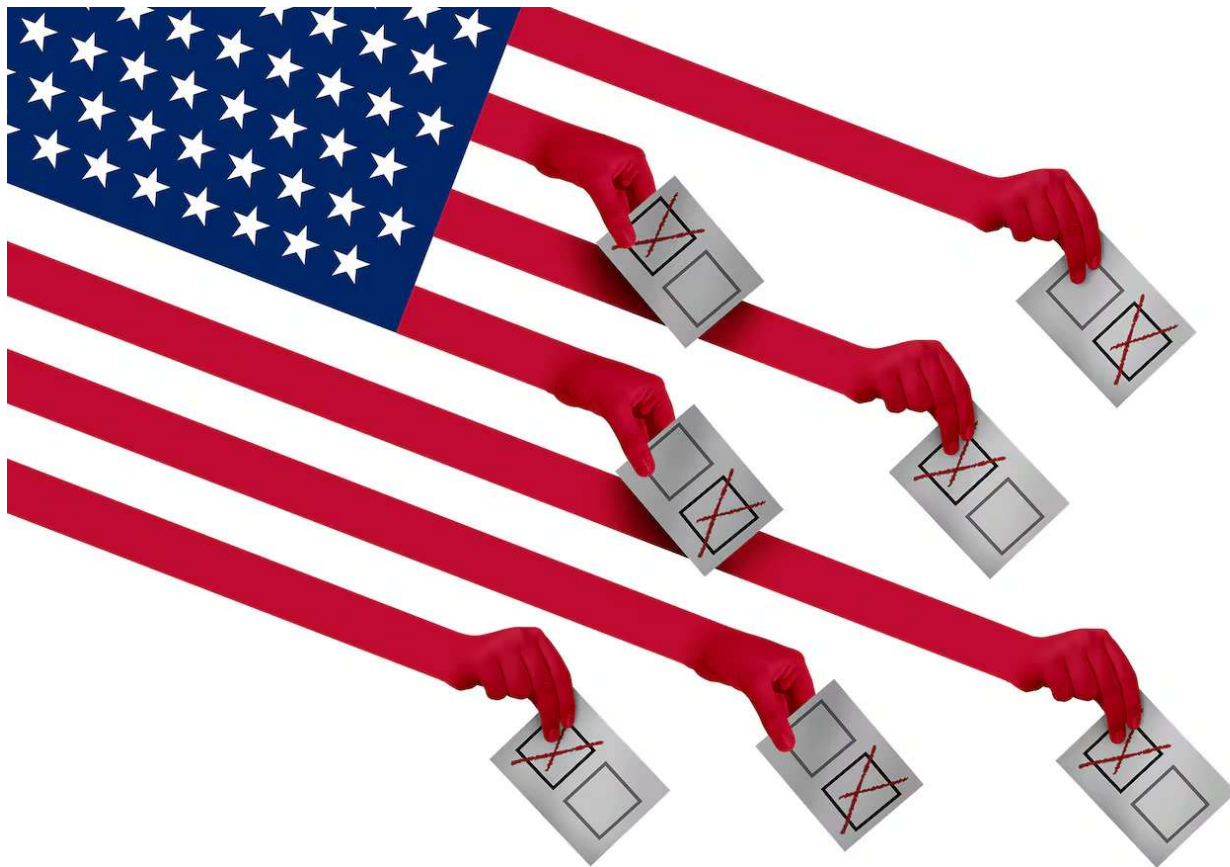


IDEAS

OK, doomer

Trump can't steal the midterms. ICE can't be at the polls. A rogue clerk won't tip the House. Our elections run smoothly — and this November's will, too.

By **Derek T. Muller** Updated October 20, 2026, 3:00 a.m.



FRESHIDEA/ADOBE

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Millions of Americans have been casting ballots ahead of November's elections. Millions more will head to the polls. Thousands of federal, state, and local officials are on the ballot, along with hundreds of initiatives nationwide.

Thus far, voting has occurred without meaningful disruption. And not just the general election. There were numerous special and state elections in 2025, along with the totality of the 2026 primary season. Everything ran smoothly.

But pervasive anxiety about the election remains. [Public confidence](#) that votes will be counted accurately has declined. Distrust in the [postal service's reliability](#) to deliver absentee ballots has increased. Memories of rioting at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, what then-Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell labeled a "[failed insurrection](#)," understandably linger. Major questions about our democracy loom. But there are good reasons to be confident in our elections.

There is always a risk that something disastrous could occur. A terrorist attack disrupted New York's primary in 2001. A hurricane struck New Jersey in 2012 and adversely affected early voting. And no matter the level of preparation, some things — like punch card and butterfly ballots in Florida's exceedingly close election in 2000 — converge by chance to create a perfect storm.

A great deal of fear, however, is not grounded in reality. Many known risks have been anticipated and prepared for. Others are exceedingly low or require an unusual and improbable alignment of factors.

Start with concerns that the federal government will disrupt polling places on Election Day. We've already had dozens of primary and special elections across thousands of counties over the last two years, with no such issues. Department of Justice officials, as has long been the custom, have observed polling places in a range of states over the last two years, from Massachusetts to California, largely without incident, apart from one [odd inquiry](#) in Wyoming this summer.

It's possible, of course, that it won't simply be Department of Justice officials but FBI or ICE agents. Federal law already prohibits [such activity at the polling places](#), and there are no alternative [statutory mechanisms](#) that would allow it. A Supreme Court decision last year decisively rejected the notion that the president may call up the [National Guard](#) on a whim without relying on express authorization under the Constitution or an act of Congress.

A separate concern about the FBI has arisen over the seizure of ballots or voting equipment pursuant to a search warrant. Earlier this year, [FBI agents seized election](#)

[material](#) in Fulton County, Ga., related to the 2020 election. Of course, that election was six years ago, and the Cabinet official who oversaw the operation has [since resigned](#). No other meaningful federal efforts to seize ballots have occurred since, and certainly none in active or ongoing elections.

Regardless, safeguards exist. Federal courts are [subject to constitutional constraints](#) if they are asked to issue warrants that could disrupt the ongoing canvass of a federal election, including a prohibition on interfering with ballots in a way that would disrupt how Congress seats its members. There are [additional judicial checks](#) available if courts are asked to authorize the seizure of ballots while the tabulation of ballots is ongoing. Courts, for instance, must ensure that they do not disrupt the chain of custody of ballots when issuing any orders. And warrants may only be issued on a showing of probable cause, not baseless speculation. States are [actively preparing](#) to litigate in the event that anyone attempts to interfere with their election administration.

There are legitimate concerns about the postal service and absentee ballots. The USPS has [scaled back service](#) in a range of ways in recent years. These degradations have adversely affected the [timely delivery of all mail](#), fueling concern about the delivery of absentee ballots.

That said, there is already evidence that voters are altering their behavior. Absentee ballot requests are down in some jurisdictions. That doesn't necessarily mean voters will stop voting; it may simply mean they are planning to take advantage of alternative opportunities to vote, including, in most jurisdictions, ample early in-person voting. Such opportunities were almost unheard of a quarter century ago, but they are commonplace today.

If some portion of the population switches from absentee voting to early in-person voting, that would be a good thing. The mail is sometimes slow, and, occasionally, ballots are lost or destroyed. Ballots that lack a voter's signature or other essential information might be rejected and never counted. Mismarked ballots might mean a voter's preference won't be counted for certain offices. In contrast, early in-person voting has far fewer pressure points in which a voter's ballot might be rejected.

There is another positive development among absentee voters: They are [returning their ballots earlier](#). Public awareness campaigns instruct voters to return their ballots in a timely fashion, ideally as early as feasible. Voters are heeding these instructions to reduce the likelihood that their ballots will be delivered too late to count. And some states allow absentee ballots received after Election Day to be counted, a practice the Supreme Court [ratified earlier this year](#) as consistent with federal law.

Finally, drop boxes — ubiquitous in a previous generation for returning VHS rentals or making overnight bank deposits — allow voters to return ballots without relying on the postal service or on the business hours of election administration offices. States have been [increasing](#) their availability and security.

Election administration has been challenged in other ways. Of note, the possibility of noncitizen voting in the United States has erupted into the public discourse. [Noncitizen voting](#) is exceedingly rare, but not nonexistent. The Department of Justice has aggressively pursued noncitizen voting claims and has prosecuted several dozen incidents over the last 25 years. Of course, some context is in order: More than 150 million Americans voted in the 2024 presidential election.

Still, noncitizen voting, even if infrequent, is a bad thing, and efforts by states to [clean up their voter rolls](#) to reduce its likelihood are laudable. States have divergent approaches, and some have sought help from the federal government. The Supreme Court [recently permitted](#) some states to continue efforts to verify citizenship by using specific federal government databases and comparing them to existing voter registration files.

Concerns have arisen that states might be overzealous and start canceling the registrations of citizens. Thus far, such episodes appear to be isolated and infrequent. States should, of course, review evidence of citizenship with care. But even the most aggressive states have lost any chance to make a meaningful impact on 2026, as [states are forbidden](#) from making major changes to voter registration lists [within 90 days of the election](#).

At the end of this process, of course, votes are tabulated and winners identified. There may be recounts or election contests around the country — there always are, because, inevitably, some elections are quite close. But the ordinary course of litigation is nothing that will be particularly disruptive. Even overzealous or frivolous litigation can be quickly disposed of through the usual process of judicial review.

The Supreme Court has shown itself to be a reliable arbiter of contentious election disputes in recent years, whatever the public may think about its decisions in other domains. It summarily rejected all [challenges](#) to the results of the 2020 election. When redistricting spats crisscrossed the United States, from [Texas](#) to [California](#) to [Virginia](#) to [Missouri](#), the court stayed out of the fray and allowed state legislatures, state courts and citizen initiatives to sort out disputes. It allowed states to continue to count absentee

ballots received after Election Day, if they so desire. There are good reasons to think that the federal courts, and the Supreme Court in particular, will ensure that the voters have the final say.

And when Congress gathers on Jan. 3 to seat its new members, the process will almost assuredly operate smoothly. Members of Congress who win in their respective states receive certificates of election. Those certificates serve as the way Congress determines who is entitled to each seat. Virtually all races are resolved by mid-December each year, and it is the exceedingly rare case where certification is in doubt. If a state drags its heels in certifying a result in a way that is inconsistent with law, courts are readily available to ensure that [certification occurs promptly](#).

By the time those members show up to the Capitol on Jan. 3, any recounts and election contests will be resolved. Despite [fears of a “rogue clerk,”](#) federal law instructs the clerk of the House of Representatives to accept all certified winners of congressional elections, and clerks have long acted pursuant to longstanding parliamentary procedure. Those members vote for a Speaker, who then presides over the swearing in of all new members. Spurious objections to the seating of members can be quickly rejected by a majority of those present — [no minority can make itself a majority](#).

In short, elections are being conducted safely and securely around the United States. There have been many elections conducted in the United States over the last several months, and all of them took place as smoothly as one would expect.

One last concern merits attention: There is a risk of sowing misinformation around elections. An isolated video with limited context can go viral. A baseless rumor about a candidate's health — such as a recent one about [James Talarico](#), a US Senate candidate in Texas — can spread rapidly. Truth does not always spread as quickly as a falsehood, and even when corrected, there is something that sticks in voters' minds about a false rumor.

Vigilance and awareness are needed. Voters need to consider the sources of information before believing anything. Dot-gov websites are the preferred sources for any election information. Any video clip or quotation that seems too outrageous or shocking may well require more context — and just a little more judgment from voters.

That means having perspective on the likelihood of things going wrong in the election. The possibility always exists. Elections are complicated things that coordinate millions of people casting millions of votes in thousands of jurisdictions. But our election officials work diligently and tirelessly to ensure that qualified voters have the opportunity to cast a ballot and to have that ballot count. Keep that in mind when you go to the polls this fall.

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