



# The Democracy Landscape

An increasing number of journalists are moving away from traditional horse-race political coverage, which treats elections like a sporting event and tends to be overwhelmingly negative. They recognize that what's at stake in our elections isn't just who wins and loses, but also the health of our democracy itself. At the **Solutions Journalism Network**, we say that journalists have a duty to tell the whole story, which in political reporting means not just covering polls, candidates and where democracy is under attack, but also examining who is responding to those challenges and how, and which approaches are showing progress. Not all topics lend themselves to a solutions frame, but here are some key areas where outlets could look for solutions stories:

## VOTING RIGHTS

What are policymakers doing to shore up the right to vote and expand the franchise in the face of anti-democratic threats and voting restrictions? Many such efforts are already underway and are worth examining. For example, consider covering efforts to ensure that formerly incarcerated people know when their voting rights are restored, similar to what Nicole Lewis and Andrew Rodriguez Calderón of The Marshall Project [reported on](#) in 2021. While a number of states have tried to enfranchise the formerly incarcerated, implementation of new laws has been a challenge. From The Marshall Project's story:

Many people working to register newly eligible voters said the low registration numbers for formerly incarcerated people reflect more than apathy and political alienation. Most don't even know they now have the right to vote. None of the states in our analysis required corrections departments or boards of elections to notify newly eligible voters of their rights. The task was left to political organizers, already stretched thin by get-out-the-vote efforts amid a pandemic. To coax the newly enfranchised back onto the voter rolls, they've had to dispel the widely-held fear that voting could mean going back to prison.

Organizers are gearing up to apply the lessons of the last election to the politically consequential 2022 midterms. They're urging corrections officials and probation and parole officers to notify people that their rights have been restored. With the pandemic waning, they're planning to reach more formerly incarcerated people in person at rallies and in halfway houses across their states.



## ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

How are states and localities managing our increasingly politicized election processes and the expansion of options like vote-by-mail? Natalia Contreras of Votebeat Texas [covered](#) improvements to vote-by-mail in that state in 2023, which greatly reduced the percentage of ballot rejection rates. From Contreras' story:

Throughout 2022, local election administrators across the state took note of the problems.

They mobilized to alert voters in their counties of the changes to the process.

They talked to news outlets to spread the word about the new procedures and added brightly colored paper inserts to mail ballot packets, reminding voters to include their ID numbers.

By the November general election, the statewide rejection rates decreased from 12% in the March primary to 2.7%.

Then election officials told lawmakers about voters' experiences with the new rules. Some said they are glad to see lawmakers this year listened to suggestions from election workers across the state.

"This is a very solid step in removing some of those barriers in the process," said Remi Garza, the Cameron County elections administrator, pointing to how the changes make it easier for voters to access the online portal and correct errors without coming in person. "Every step has a deadline, and the harder it is to meet those deadlines for the voter, the harder it is for us to get their vote counted."



## MISINFORMATION

What's being done to combat efforts to mislead and confuse voters through social media and other channels? In 2023, Manmeet Sahni [interviewed](#) Conecta Arizona founder Maritza Félix about how her news organization is fighting misinformation in Latinx communities.

Since 2020, we have been combating mis- and disinformation on WhatsApp, answering basic questions. We were really pushing for civil engagement for first-generation voters.

For example, trans-border people as there are a lot of people who have dual citizenship — many were born here and then moved to Mexico and were raised over there, but they came and voted for the first time in the U.S. In mixed-status families, where one (person) was born here (in the U.S.) and is growing up in the system, they are not quite there to petition for the family yet. And so many family members cannot cross the border (like) the way they did in the past.

We are getting ready for a more practical approach for 2024 and are still in the process of defining our strategy for the next election cycle, but the focus is on more informal yet informative guides to address the needs of these first-time voters, dual citizens, voters with mixed-status families, and Latinos who are getting more involved in politics. We are teaching them to identify and fact-

## STRUCTURAL BIASES

What concrete solutions are being proposed for the structural biases and democratic imbalances deeply embedded within our political system? In 2022, ProPublica's Aliyya Swaby and Annie Waldman [covered](#) some of the efforts to make voting less confusing, and how they are helping increase voter registration in several states:

As a ProPublica investigation found, today's election system remains a modern-day literacy test — a convoluted obstacle course for people who struggle to read. Though many people may require assistance with registration or at the ballot box, some counties and states have made it more challenging to secure help.

Experts say that redesigning both the registration and election processes to be more accessible will allow more people to vote without assistance and participate more robustly in democracy. Ballots and forms should be simply written and logically laid out, jargon should be stripped from instructions and ballot amendments and, if possible, new forms should be tested on a diverse group of constituents.

Such reforms can be expensive and time-consuming, which stops some states and municipalities from taking on the task, said Dana Chisnell, who co-founded the nonprofit Center for Civic Design to help states and counties develop accessible voter materials. "They may have old voting systems that they're holding together with duct tape and baling twine because they can't afford to replace them or there were other priorities in the county," she said.

But numerous examples show that when such changes are made, more votes get counted. "If we make it better for people with low literacy, it will actually be better for everyone," said [University of Baltimore Professor Kathryn] Summers.

Pennsylvania noted a decrease in rejected voter registration forms after implementing clearer instructions and layout in online forms. Colorado, Vermont and New York have introduced similar measures. Other countries' higher rates of voter turnout despite lower literacy rates also is worth examining.

