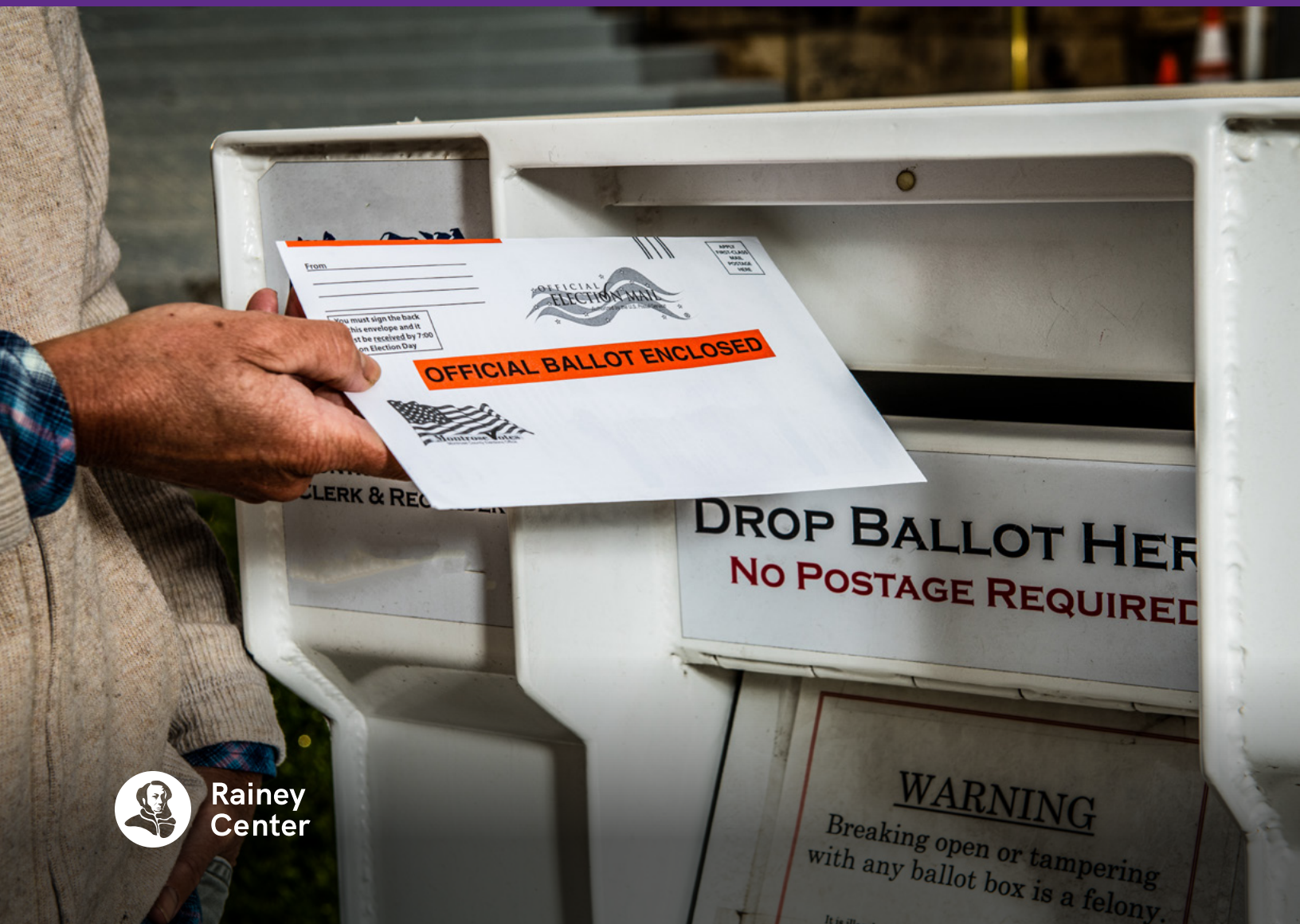
Free, Fair, and Trusted Elections

A Conservative Assessment of State Election Policy and Reform Priorities

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Rainey Center


I VOTED

Why Election Integrity Matters

Free and fair elections are the foundation of American self-government. They are the mechanism by which citizens grant consent, resolve political disagreement, and hold public officials accountable. When elections are administered competently and transparently, citizens accept outcomes—even when their preferred candidates lose. When confidence in elections erodes, however, democratic legitimacy weakens, civic trust declines, and political conflict intensifies.

This report begins from a clear premise: election integrity requires both broad access to lawful participation and strong safeguards against fraud, error, and abuse. These objectives are not in conflict. Properly designed election systems can—and must—make it easy to vote and hard to cheat.

This principle is deeply rooted in American constitutional tradition and in the legacy of Joseph P. Rainey, for whom the Rainey Center is named. Born into slavery in South Carolina, Rainey became the first Black American to serve in the United States House of Representatives. His political life unfolded during Reconstruction, a period marked by contested elections, disputed legitimacy, and fierce struggles over who could participate in self-government and under what rules.

Rainey understood that voting rights without lawful protection are fragile—and that elections without public trust invite backlash, repression, and instability. His legacy reminds us that the right to vote and the integrity of elections rise or fall together.

Today, the United States faces a renewed crisis of confidence in elections. While verified cases of widespread fraud remain rare, persistent controversies over election administration, changing rules, opaque processes, and uneven enforcement have fueled skepticism—particularly among conservative voters. Restoring trust will require more than reassurances. It requires clear rules, credible data, and reforms grounded in law and administrative best practice.

This policy brief presents the findings of the Rainey Center's Election Integrity Review, a comparative, state-based evaluation of election laws and practices designed to advance credible, conservative-oriented reform.

A Conservative Case for Election Integrity

Conservatives have long emphasized ordered liberty, the rule of law, and institutional competence. Election integrity is a natural extension of these principles.

Throughout American history, leaders across the political spectrum—including Republicans—have recognized that democratic legitimacy depends on both access and safeguards. President Theodore Roosevelt argued that elections must be honest and efficient as well as open to all citizens. President Dwight Eisenhower supported modernized election administration as essential to national stability. Bipartisan reforms such as the Help America Vote Act reflected a shared understanding that election systems must adapt to changing technology and voter behavior.

Contemporary Conservative Election Reform Increasingly Emphasizes:

+ Clear statutory rules rather than ad hoc discretion
+ Transparency and verifiability
+ Federalism and state responsibility
+ Public confidence as a governing good

The conservative task is not to choose between access and security, but to design institutions that achieve both.

The Challenge: Declining Trust and Fragmented Policy

Public confidence in American elections has declined markedly over the past decade, with deep partisan divides in trust. While some skepticism is fueled by misinformation or dissatisfaction with outcomes, other concerns reflect genuine weaknesses in election administration.

Across States, Recurring Drivers of Declining Trust Include:

- Rapid procedural changes implemented without legislative approval
- Inconsistent rules across counties or jurisdictions
- Limited transparency in ballot processing and post-election review
- Confusing eligibility and verification standards
- High-profile administrative errors, even when outcomes are unaffected

Trust in elections depends not only on technical accuracy, but on public understanding of how elections work. Systems that are lawful but opaque, or accessible but poorly explained, invite suspicion regardless of intent.



Rainey Center's State-based Review

Under the U.S. Constitution, states bear primary responsibility for administering elections. This federalist structure has produced wide variation in election systems, reflecting differences in geography, population, administrative capacity, and political culture.

Rainey Center's Election Integrity review evaluates twelve states—Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia—across two core dimensions:

Easy to Vote

+ Voter registration systems
+ Absentee and mail voting rules
+ Early and in-person voting options
+ Protections for military and overseas voters
+ Ballot access and voter assistance

Hard to Cheat

+ Voter identity verification
+ Voter roll maintenance
+ Ballot custody and chain-of-custody protections
+ Post-election audits and recounts
+ Equipment standards and cybersecurity practices

Each state was assessed using existing state law, administrative rules, and official guidance from election authorities.

The goal was not to rank states for political advantage, but to identify strengths, weaknesses, and actionable reform opportunities.

STATE ASSESSMENT

Making It Easy to Vote — Without Sacrificing Integrity

States with high voter participation do not rely on a single access policy. Instead, they offer multiple lawful pathways to cast a ballot—online registration, early voting, absentee voting, and in-person options—while maintaining clear eligibility rules.

+ States such as Arizona, Georgia, Maine, Michigan, and Utah demonstrate that access works best when voters can choose how and when to vote.
+ Access is most effective when paired with clear verification and administrative certainty.

Key Takeaway

Access expands participation most successfully when it is predictable, well-communicated, and integrated into a broader system of safeguards.

STATE ASSESSMENT

Voter Registration: Accuracy and Accessibility Can Coexist

High-performing states combine convenient registration options with routine list maintenance to keep voter rolls accurate.

+ Online registration improves accuracy by reducing transcription errors.
+ Regular list maintenance and data matching reduce duplicate or outdated registrations.
+ States with clearer statutory authority for list maintenance experience fewer disputes.

Key Takeaway

Voter roll integrity is strongest when registration access and maintenance responsibilities are clearly defined in statute.

STATE ASSESSMENT

Mail Voting is Not a Binary Choice

Mail voting systems vary widely. Trust outcomes depend less on whether mail voting exists and more on how verification, custody, and transparency are handled.

+ States like Utah and Oregon pair mail voting with voter ID, signature verification, ballot tracking, and audits.
+ States with ambiguous verification rules or inconsistent county practices experience higher controversy.

Key Takeaway

Mail voting functions best when rules are uniform, verification is visible, and post-election review is robust.

STATE ASSESSMENT

Ballot Tracking and Cure Build Confidence

Voter-facing transparency tools reduce confusion, misinformation, and distrust—especially in absentee and mail voting environments.

+ Ballot tracking systems allow voters to see when ballots are issued, received, and accepted.
+ Clear cure processes reduce rejection rates and improve voter confidence.

Key Takeaway

Transparency strengthens legitimacy by giving voters real-time insight into the process, not just the outcome.

STATE ASSESSMENT

Paper Ballots are the Foundation of Trust

Every state that performs well on election integrity relies on voter-verifiable paper ballots or paper audit trails.

+ Paper ballots enable recounts, audits, and independent verification.
+ States without clear paper records face persistent skepticism regardless of outcome.

Key Takeaway

Paper ballots convert disputes from political arguments into evidence-based verification.

STATE ASSESSMENT

Post-election Audits Matter More Than Pre-election Rhetoric

Audits are among the most effective tools for resolving election disputes—yet they remain unevenly adopted.

+ States using risk-limiting audits are better equipped to validate outcomes.
+ Public reporting of audit results improves trust across partisan lines.

Key Takeaway

Audits provide a credible answer to allegations without restricting lawful voting.

STATE ASSESSMENT

Chain-of-custody Rules Reduce Speculation

Uncertainty about ballot handling fuels distrust more than documented misconduct.

+ States with codified chain-of-custody procedures experience fewer post-election disputes.
+ Clear rules protect both voters and election workers.

Key Takeaway

Integrity is reinforced when every step in the process is accounted for and documented.

STATE ASSESSMENT

Stability is an Integrity Safeguard

Frequent rule changes, litigation, or emergency guidance undermine confidence—even in well-run elections.

+ States with durable statutory frameworks face fewer crises.
+ Legislative clarity outperforms court-driven governance.

Key Takeaway

Stable rules are themselves a safeguard against mistrust and confusion.





What the Data Reveals

Across all twelve states, several clear lessons emerge.

Trust is Built by Systems, Not Single Policies

States with higher confidence—such as Utah, Georgia, and Maine—combine access, verification, transparency, and audits into coherent systems. By contrast, states with partial or inconsistent reforms experience persistent controversy even when elections are competently administered.

Stability and Clarity Matter as Much as Policy Substance

States marked by frequent litigation or last-minute rule changes—most notably Pennsylvania and North Carolina—struggle with confidence despite strong underlying safeguards. Legislative clarity and durability are themselves integrity protections.

Audits Are Underutilized—and Highly Effective

Post-election audits, especially risk-limiting audits, consistently emerge as one of the most effective trust-building tools. States that employ them are better positioned to respond credibly to allegations of error or fraud.



High-Leverage Reform Priorities for States

Based on this analysis, the Rainey Center identifies five reforms that offer the greatest return for policymakers.

REFORM PRIORITY 1

Universal Use of Voter-Verifiable Paper Ballots

Paper ballots or paper audit trails are the foundation of credible elections. Every high-performing state in our review relies on them.

State Example — Georgia

Georgia's transition to statewide paper ballots enabled full recounts and the nation's first statewide risk-limiting audit, dramatically improving post-election verification capacity.

REFORM PRIORITY 2

Robust, Transparent Post-Election Audits

Audits verify outcomes without restricting participation and provide evidence-based answers to public concern.

State Example — Maine

Maine's routine use of risk-limiting audits demonstrates how statistically grounded verification can reinforce trust in high-access systems.

REFORM PRIORITY 3

Clear, Uniform Mail Ballot Verification Rules

Mail voting controversies are driven more by ambiguity than by access itself. States with clear, statewide standards outperform those with county-level variation.

State Example — Utah

Utah pairs universal mail voting with strong voter ID, signature verification, and ballot tracking—showing that access and integrity can reinforce each other.

REFORM PRIORITY 4

Voter-Facing Transparency Tools

Ballot tracking and clear communication reduce misinformation and suspicion.

State Example — Arizona

Arizona's ballot tracking and cure processes provide voters real-time insight into ballot status, strengthening transparency even amid controversy.

REFORM PRIORITY 5

Legislative Ownership and Institutional Stability

Durable statutory frameworks outperform litigation-driven or emergency governance.

State Example — Florida

Florida's legislatively codified election rules provide clarity and predictability, reducing uncertainty for voters and administrators alike.


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Key Takeaways for Policymakers

From this twelve-state review, five conclusions stand out:

+ Access and integrity are complementary, not competing values
+ Verification after the vote often matters more than restriction before the vote
+ Clear rules outperform complex but opaque systems
+ Transparency is as important as technical accuracy
+ Legislatures—not courts—are best positioned to sustain election legitimacy



CONCLUSION

A Conservative Path Forward

The future of American self-government depends not only on who wins elections, but on whether citizens believe elections are conducted fairly, lawfully, and competently.

Credible, conservative election reform is both possible and necessary. By focusing on audits, verification, transparency, and stable legal frameworks, states can strengthen institutions without suppressing participation.

This project reflects Joseph P. Rainey's enduring insight: self-government depends not only on rights, but on rules—and on public faith that those rules are applied fairly.


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