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Results from Qualitative Research

# Insights Into Perceptions of Noncitizen Voting

CONDUCTED FOR VOTING RIGHTS LAB  
AND SECURE DEMOCRACY USA

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# The goal.

Explore perceptions of noncitizen voting in 2024, test messaging approaches to address concerns, and evaluate reactions to policy proposals.

NOTE: All learnings from this messaging research project are for 501(c)(3)-compliant purposes only. They are *not* to be used for any partisan, political, or electioneering activities by any organization.



# Methods.

42 in-depth interviews

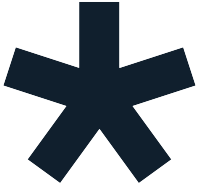
Not so strong Democrats, independents, and Republicans (n = 34) who neither strongly agree nor strongly disagree – "I trust election systems in US." Handful of progressive Democrats (n=8).

November 10 through 13, 2024

# Key insights.



# Key insights.



## Concerns about 2024 elections.

Participants generally express confidence in the 2024 elections. When asked about concerns related to election integrity, no one mentions noncitizens voting. Instead they talk about the potential mishandling of mail-in and absentee ballots, interference from Russia (e.g., bomb threats) and Elon Musk (Starlink), and outcomes that “feel off” because they differed from expectations.

When asked directly, most say they’ve heard claims about noncitizens voting – from Trump, Republican politicians, and social media. They say they’ve heard about noncitizens using “fake documents,” vulnerabilities in places without photo ID requirements, or in areas where noncitizen voting is legal (local elections). A few say they’ve heard allegations that Democrats are encouraging noncitizen voting by transporting them illegally to the US, encouraging border crossings, or “bribery.”

**At this point, most participants are unconvinced that noncitizens voting is a big issue.**

Just 10 of 42 participants think undocumented immigrants are voting in elections and only 3 think this impacts election outcomes. 8 of 42 think noncitizens voting will be an issue in future elections.

Republicans are more likely than others to believe claims, but even still, many haven't fully bought in yet.

Among 42 participants:

**10**

Say undocumented immigrants are voting in elections (9 not sure)

Republicans: 9 of 16  
Ind/weak Dem: 0 of 18  
Progressive Dems: 1 of 16

**3**

Say undocumented immigrant voting impacts election outcomes (10 not sure)

Republicans: 3  
Ind/weak Dem: 0  
Progressive Dems: 0

**8**

Say it will be a major issue / somewhat of an issue in future elections (3 not sure)

Republicans: 5  
Ind/weak Dem: 3  
Progressive Dems: 0

**Here's why participants lean toward rejecting claims about noncitizens voting.**

Trust in existing safeguards is #1.





**Here are some key vulnerabilities.**

## **BIGGEST VULNERABILITIES**

(IN ROUGH ORDER)

- Lack of photo ID requirements in many states – by far #1
- Lack of checking IDs in some states
- Hearing about incidents raises concerns
- Sanctuary cities are “lax”
- Problem in border areas
- Noncitizens can vote in some elections
- Automatic voter registration
- Undocumented immigrants can get driver’s licenses/IDs
- Hearing about any number of cases can confirm it’s a problem
- Democrats offering “handouts” is an incentive for both Democrats and undocumented immigrants to vote illegally
- Outside groups or “criminal networks” could be involved
- Democrats might bus in immigrants to vote

## Promising messaging directions.

We explored the impact of using an accuracy prompt to evoke logic and disrupt thinking about undocumented immigrants voting.

It worked.

After the statement, most participants find it “highly unlikely” that undocumented immigrants would risk voting. They say “no one would risk deportation” and “the risks far outweigh the benefit of just one vote.”


After the prompt, several participants express less concern about noncitizen voting, including among key audiences, like independents and Republicans who expressed concern earlier.

It’s notable that several participants mentioned this idea earlier in the discussion – prior to the prompt.

### Accuracy Prompt

Now, I’d like you to imagine this:

Imagine you are an undocumented immigrant living in the U.S. You have spent a significant amount of time, money, and resources trying to get here. If you try to submit a voter registration form or cast a ballot, you not only expose yourself to prison time for perjury, you also hand the government the evidence it needs to imprison or deport you. All so you could cast one vote.




We tested a message about existing safeguards, which had power in boosting confidence in the system. The most reassuring part – highlighted in orange – is that all Americans must provide SSN or an official state ID when first voting.

That said, it doesn't ease all concerns. For example, some say that undocumented immigrants could use fraudulent IDs or Social Security numbers.

### Election Safeguard Statement

Our elections are safeguarded by strong measures to ensure that only U.S. citizens can vote. Every step includes checks and balances carried out by teams of officials – and these processes are reviewed and updated after every election.

When registering or when someone votes for the first time, **Americans must provide either a Social Security number or official state ID like a driver's license, which allows election officials to confirm their citizenship status.** Officials regularly verify and crosscheck databases to keep their files accurate. During the vote-counting process, bipartisan teams of officials work together to make sure all ballots are cast by eligible citizens and counted accurately.



We explored reactions to studies on the low rate of noncitizens voting. The Georgia Republican Secretary of State example was most reassuring (at right):

- The specific ratio / numbers, “9 out of millions,” is more effective than a claim – such as “it’s very rare.”
- The review was conducted by a Republican, which added credibility for some participants.
- The example emphasized that “millions of records” were reviewed, reinforcing the thoroughness of the process.
- The cases were discovered and addressed before the election, demonstrating proactive safeguards.

#### **Excerpt from Studies Message**

In October 2024, Georgia’s Republican Secretary of State reviewed millions of registered voters and found just 20 noncitizens on the rolls, only 9 of whom had ever been able to cast a ballot.



## Reactions to policy proposals.

We explored reactions to three potential policies related to noncitizen voting.

- **Cancelling registration by non-response to mail.** Participants overwhelmingly oppose this policy. Many worry about people, including themselves, who don't pay much attention to mail or could mistake an official notice for junk mail. Hearing about the Texas example intensifies opposition, with participants angry over the scale of harm. Some raise concerns about the policy being a tactic for voter suppression, including targeting people of color.

- **Mandatory Voter Re-Registration.** Participants mostly oppose mandatory re-registration, viewing it as unnecessary, “overkill,” burdensome, and harmful to voter turnout. Voters see a wide range of groups being disproportionately affected, including people of color, older adults, non-English speakers, and low-income individuals. Several intuitively view the policy as an attempt to suppress votes in certain communities, linking it to racist or partisan motives.
- **Improved Federal-State Data Sharing.** Participants are mostly supportive of better data sharing, seeing it as a way to improve election security, accuracy, and efficiency. Some worry about privacy, data misuse, and potential inefficiencies.

# Considerations.



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The following pages provide considerations for messaging and / or future testing on:

- Combating dis/misinformation
- Talking about motivations behind claims
- How to describe claims
- How to describe the incidence
- Talking about safeguards
- Responding to new policy ideas
- Messengers
- Vulnerabilities

	Considerations
On mis/disinformation	<p>Voters are aware of mis/disinformation. They don't want to be victims of it. Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citing <u>multiple</u> mainstream media sources on the issue</li> <li>• Using an accuracy prompt</li> <li>• Warning audiences to avoid going “down the rabbit hole”</li> <li>• Warning audiences about bots and AI</li> <li>• Cuing audiences to use “critical thinking”</li> <li>• Educating voters that false claims are “intentionally trying to misinform voters”</li> </ul>
Motivations for mis/disinformation	<p>Consider these motivations for spreading dis/misinfo:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To divide us / turn us against each other / keep Americans angry with each other to pursue a hidden agenda or b) blame each other instead of people in power a)</li> <li>• To distract us to pursue hidden agenda; “distraction tactics” from real problems / other issues</li> <li>• To cause fear and outrage so voters will accept anything leaders want to do</li> <li>• To rile up supporters who don't have critical thinking skills; keep supporters thinking emotionally instead of logically</li> <li>• To help fuel support for other policies, like mass deportation or building a wall</li> <li>• To help leaders hold onto power</li> <li>• To use as a political tactic to turn people against Democrats / the Democratic Party</li> <li>• To use as a tactic in the media to sway voters</li> <li>• To play politics and use politically-driven narratives</li> </ul>

	Considerations
Use an accuracy prompt / invoke critical thinking	<p>Remind voters that undocumented immigrants wouldn't take the risks to vote illegally. E.g.,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They wouldn't risk being deported</li> <li>• They live in fear of being discovered; they try to keep a low profile</li> <li>• They would not put themselves in danger</li> <li>• Someone with so much to lose is not going to risk their livelihood</li> <li>• Use "just one vote" or to "vote one time" to emphasize small benefit</li> <li>• Full prompt: Imagine you are an undocumented immigrant living in the U.S. You have spent a significant amount of time, money, and resources trying to get here. If you try to submit a voter registration form or cast a ballot, you risk the government identifying you, arresting you, and deporting you</li> </ul>
How to describe claims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsubstantiated</li> <li>• No proof to back up false claims, study after study, audit after audit</li> <li>• No factual information to back up</li> <li>• Politically-driven narratives</li> <li>• Fabricated issue used for political reasons</li> </ul>
Describing the incidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very rare occurrences that are caught by multiple layers of checks and balances</li> <li>• If using an example, use Georgia's Republican SOS</li> <li>• Specific incidence rates, "9 out of millions," may be more tangible than "undetectable"</li> </ul>

	Considerations
Center this core safeguard	<p>This message elicits the most confidence, including among Republicans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When registering or when someone votes for the first time, Americans must provide either a Social Security number or an official state ID like a driver’s license, which allows election officials to confirm their citizenship status.</li></ul>
Other safeguard messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Federal and state laws already make it illegal</li><li>• There are multiple checks and balances in place to detect fraudulent voting</li><li>• Checks and balances are reviewed and updated after every election</li><li>• Officials regularly verify and crosscheck databases to keep their files accurate</li><li>• Every state works hard to ensure proper voting requirements and eligibility</li></ul>
Full message	<p>Our elections are safeguarded by strong measures to ensure that only U.S. citizens can vote. Every step includes checks and balances carried out by teams of officials – and these processes are reviewed and updated after every election.</p> <p>When registering or when someone votes for the first time, Americans must provide either a Social Security number or an official state ID like a driver’s license, which allows election officials to confirm their citizenship status. Officials regularly verify and crosscheck databases to keep their files accurate. During the vote-counting process, bipartisan teams of officials work together to make sure all ballots are cast by eligible citizens and counted accurately.</p>

## Considerations

On policies	<p>Consider ways to communicate the impact on <u>your audiences / eligible voters</u>. E.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You could be turned away on Election Day</li> <li>• Thousands of eligible voters could be turned away on Election Day</li> </ul>
Cancelling registration by non-response to mail	<p>The most egregious part of this policy is having to respond to <u>mail</u>. Emphasize all the ways they could be cancelled:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you don't check your mail often</li> <li>• If you don't pay a lot of attention to your mail</li> <li>• If you mistake an official notice for junk mail</li> <li>• If you were traveling and missed it</li> </ul>
Removing names that match a suspected noncitizen	<p>Your registration could be cancelled just on your name alone.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are common names across communities. There needs to be more criteria for identifying noncitizens, not just name alone.</li> </ul> <p>Among progressives and people of color:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This policy will disproportionately affect people of color and legal immigrants because they are most likely to share common names with noncitizens.</li> </ul>
Use Texas example	<p>In 2019, Texas used outdated DMV records to check its voter list and mistakenly flagged tens of thousands of eligible citizens for removal. Like many states, Texas doesn't allow same-day registration, so long-time voters arrived on Election Day but couldn't vote.</p>

## Considerations

### Mandatory re-registration

Tap into the feeling this is an excessive burden on all Americans who are already lawfully registered to vote. Be sure to highlight that a driver's license would not work.

Consider testing:

- Driver's licenses already require several forms of documentation
- Most people don't have a passport
- Many people don't have their original birth certificate
- Getting passports or original birth certificates is expensive and time consuming
- Principles that voting must be free and accessible to all

The policy would disenfranchise these voters who are already lawfully registered to vote:

- Elderly who may lose documents over time and would struggle to navigate how to replace documents or get a passport
- People who don't travel internationally
- Low-income individuals who can't afford fees
- Young adults who don't have these documents or their parents don't have them
- Voters who grew up in foster care
- Voters born in very rural or remote areas
- Voters who are unfamiliar with technology or would have trouble navigating bureaucracy

### Improve data-sharing with the federal government

Participants generally support this policy, but worry about privacy, data breaches, and misuse of sensitive information.

	Considerations
Messengers / sources of info	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Officials from both parties</li> <li>• Mainstream cable news media, especially CNN and Fox News</li> <li>• Elected officials, especially across party ID</li> <li>• Other mainstream news media (e.g., NPR, ABC/CBS/NBC, New York Times, Associated Press, Washington Post, PBS, Wall Street Journal)</li> <li>• Consider testing BBC – it often comes up as a trusted source <u>because</u> it's foreign / doesn't have a stake</li> </ul>
Vulnerabilities to consider	<p>These are vulnerabilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of photo ID</li> <li>• Some states do not check IDs</li> <li>• Voter ID discussion expands into broader fears about “lax” election security</li> <li>• Hearing about isolated incidents raises concern about the issue being more widespread</li> <li>• Hearing any number of cases can confirm that this is a problem</li> <li>• Feeling illegal voting by noncitizens can happen easily because of lack of photo ID laws</li> <li>• Noncitizens can vote in some local elections</li> <li>• Rhetoric that Democrats support “handouts” or government benefits to undocumented immigrants – which provides a motivation for trying to get them to vote and for voting</li> <li>• Some wonder why Democrats are against laws to make elections more secure</li> <li>• Democrats may be seen as “forgetting about us / Americans” putting “illegal immigrants” ahead of us</li> </ul>

# PERRY UNDEM

**Voting Rights Lab** is a nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that brings state policy and legislative expertise to the fight for voting rights. We work in partnership with organizations across the country to secure, protect, and defend the voting rights of all Americans. And we track voting laws and legislation in all 50 states at [tracker.votingrightslab.org](https://tracker.votingrightslab.org).

**Secure Democracy USA** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(4) organization that works to build confidence in our elections and improve voter access across the United States. We educate policymakers and the public about what it takes to safeguard our voting systems. We use sophisticated survey and messaging research to inform our strategy and we collaborate with state leaders, election administrators, policy experts, and allies to ensure that all eligible citizens have the freedom to vote how they choose.