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Efforts to nationalize elections could turn into a hot 2026 issue

By Tom Kirvan

As the 2026 midterm elections approach, President Donald Trump has renewed calls for sweeping federal election reforms, arguing that the United States needs uniform national standards to ensure what he repeatedly calls “election integrity.”

The effort has reignited a constitutional and political debate over whether Washington should take a far larger role in administering federal elections, and whether such a move would strengthen democracy or destabilize it as Trump continues to consolidate power in the executive branch.

The president has said that the states are “agents” of the federal government in elections, even if the U.S. Constitution clearly says that election responsibility rests with the states.

Supporters contend that a national framework would eliminate the current patchwork of rules that vary dramatically by state. In states like California and Colorado, universal mail voting and extended early voting periods are standard. In states like Georgia and Texas, Republican lawmakers have tightened ID requirements and restricted ballot collection after the hotly contested 2020 presidential race.

Proponents of election reform say uniform rules would reduce post-election litigation and disputes. They argue that in recent cycles, procedural differences between states have fueled suspicion and legal challenges.

In January, U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi linked the presence of federal immigration agents in Minneapolis in part to Minnesota’s refusal to turn over its voter rolls. Her comments preceded an FBI search of an elections warehouse in Fulton County, Georgia – a state that was a central focus of Trump’s baseless push to overturn his 2020 election loss.

Republican Congressman Bryan Steil of Wisconsin, the chairman of the Committee on House Administration, has even gone so far as to introduce legislation titled the “Make Elections Great Again Act.” The measure would require proof of American citizenship to register to vote and allow the Department of Homeland Security to have access to voter rolls. The proposed bill would also ban voting by mail and prohibit the counting of ballots received after election day.

Administration critics warn that centralizing election authority in Washington – particularly under a president who remains deeply invested in claims of past election fraud and incited a mob to attack the Capitol on January 6, 2021 in an attempt to block the peaceful transfer of power – risks undermining democratic norms.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, who chairs the Senate Rules Committee and has long focused on election policy, has argued that efforts framed as “integrity” measures often function as voter suppression in practice. During debate over voting legislation in 2022, she said Republican-backed restrictions were about “making it harder for people to vote.”

Stacey Abrams, the voting rights advocate and former Georgia gubernatorial candidate, has repeatedly warned that tightening voter ID and mail ballot rules disproportionately affects minority and low-income voters. Abrams has argued that the focus on fraud is misplaced, noting that documented cases of widespread fraud are rare.

Election law scholar Rick Hasen of UCLA has written extensively that decentralization is a structural safeguard. In his book “Election Meltdown,” Hasen argues that while the current system has weaknesses, concentrating authority could create new vulnerabilities. A decentralized system, he notes, makes it harder for a single partisan actor to manipulate outcomes nationwide.

“Voter suppression has escalated as a Republican tool aimed to depress turnout of likely Democratic voters, fueling suspicion,” said Hasen, while noting that foreign and domestic misinformation campaigns via social media also threaten electoral integrity.

Laurence Tribe, a Harvard University constitutional law professor, has similarly cautioned that while Congress has authority to regulate federal elections, sweeping federal control could face Tenth Amendment challenges if it effectively commandeers state officials.

Even some leading conservatives express hesitation over proposals to nationalize elections. The Republican Party has historically championed federalism – the principle that states retain significant autonomy. Expanding federal authority over elections could conflict with that philosophy, according to U.S. Senator Rand

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Paul of Kentucky. Rand, who is known for his libertarian politics, has frequently warned against federal overreach in other domains and has emphasized the importance of constitutional limits on centralized power.

Georgia Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger urged lawmakers to focus on strengthening state administration of elections, declaring that focus was a better option than “moving to federalize a core function of state government.”

There are also practical concerns about nationalizing elections, according to critics of Trump’s plan.

David Becker, executive director of the Center for Election Innovation & Research and a former Justice Department attorney, has argued that election systems are deeply embedded at the state and local level. Thousands of counties administer voting, train poll workers, and manage equipment. Major changes, especially close to a national election, risk administrative disruption, according to Becker.

Politically, Democrats argue that nationalizing election rules cannot be separated from broader Republican efforts at the state level. Since 2021, GOP-led legislatures have enacted new voting laws in Georgia, Florida, Texas, and elsewhere. Critics say those measures were designed to give partisan actors more leverage over certification processes. Republicans counter that they were common-sense reforms to restore trust.

Former Attorney General William Barr, who served under Trump, stated in December 2020 that the Justice Department had not found evidence of widespread fraud sufficient to change the election outcome. His statement remains a reference point for critics who argue that federalizing elections based on fraud claims risks institutional damage.

Still, Trump’s allies maintain that perception matters as much as documented irregularities. They argue that millions of Americans lack confidence in the system, and that uniform rules could stabilize future elections.

The debate heading into the 2026 midterms reflects deeper tensions in American governance. The Constitution grants Congress authority over federal elections, but the country has relied on state-based administration for more than two centuries. Expanding federal control would be legally arguable but politically explosive.

If enacted, national standards could create consistency across states and potentially reduce disputes. But they could also trigger immediate court challenges and intensify partisan conflict, particularly if one party is perceived as shaping rules to its advantage.

At stake is not only the administration of the 2026 midterms but the long-standing balance between state autonomy and federal authority. Whether Trump’s push becomes law or stalls in Congress and the courts, it has already ensured that the mechanics of American elections remain at the center of national political conflict.

The battle was perhaps best seen in a recent federal effort to seize California’s voter rolls. The effort was repelled by U.S. District Judge David Carter, who wrote in a January 15 decision that the voter roll demands risk a chilling effect on Americans who may opt not to register to vote over concerns about how their personal information could be used by the government.

“The taking of democracy does not occur in one fell swoop; it is chipped away piece-by-piece until there is nothing left,” Judge Carter wrote. “The case before the Court is one of these cuts that imperils all Americans.”

