

‘Death by a thousand cuts’: Inside Trump’s remaking of American elections

The president remains laser-focused on an electoral system he claims is rigged — and his administration is uprooting entire chunks of the current structure ahead of the midterms.



People cast their votes at the Upper Marlboro Community Center on June 23, 2026, in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. | Gail Burton/AP

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President Donald Trump seemingly has a plan for the nation’s election apparatus: Dismantle the existing system with a series of cuts, firings and threats, rather than a sledgehammer blow.

Just last week Trump eviscerated the relatively obscure Election Assistance Commission, alarming state election officials across the country who warned it could undermine cybersecurity resources for states and localities.

That was just one of the moves the White House has made since Trump returned to office. The president has repeatedly tried to change American election policy via executive order, only to be [rebuffed by the courts](#). And he [continues to squeeze congressional Republicans](#) to pass legislation that would force voters to show proof of citizenship at the polls.

Elsewhere, the Justice Department has demanded states hand over their voter rolls, and [sent letters last week](#) to state officials threatening prosecution if they allowed any non-citizen voting, a move that voting rights advocates say is meant to sow distrust and is already illegal under several existing statutes. The DOJ's efforts to compel states to turn over voting rolls has been rejected by more than a dozen courts.

They're all parts of a strategy that spans the entirety of the existing system. Last week, the Department of Homeland Security [threatened federal election security money for states](#) if they don't use a federal system to verify voter citizenship. And the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency was [forced to cut its election security programs](#) after DOGE-led layoffs.

And now, Trump is set to deliver a speech Thursday evening that his allies have claimed will validate his long-held conspiracy theory that the 2020 election was stolen from him. It's the latest attempt by the president to undermine confidence in the electoral system, as he continues to obsess over 2020 and insist that elections both federal and local are rigged across the country.

"This is a concerted effort of death by a thousand cuts," said Ingham County, Michigan, Clerk Barb Byrum, a Democrat. "Every day is another battle, but the war that we're fighting is to maintain our democracy."

With the midterms less than four months away, Democrats and election officials warn that Trump's expanding whole-of-government effort to target the rules around elections — and increasingly, the people who run them — could fundamentally damage the entire system.

"Do I think this is part of the pattern and intentionality of undermining confidence in elections? Yes, yes, I do," said Ann Jacobs, a Democratic member of the Wisconsin Elections Commission. "The constant drumbeat since 2020 has been specifically designed to do that, and it's distressing."

Still, it remains to be seen how much of Trump's "bluster" translates into real action, said Stephen Richer, the former Republican clerk of Maricopa County, Arizona, who was targeted by Trump allies for defending the security of the 2020 election.

"The most natural end result of all this is just so Trump can bitch and moan for the next two years as he's bitched and moaned for the last six years, 10 years," he said.

But there are more threatening directions Trump can go, Richer said, including investigations after the fact. "And then there's the scary one," he added, "which is to actually interfere with the administration of the election, which I still wouldn't say is probable, but I think it's possible."

[Reports emerged this week](#) that Trump will use his Thursday speech to cite findings from U.S. intelligence agencies that there are widespread vulnerabilities in voting machines, which Trump will say impacted the 2020 elections.

When asked about the contents of the speech, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a statement that “as usual, anonymous sources are speculating about what President Trump will say during his speech on Thursday evening. The truth is, nobody knows yet what President Trump will ultimately say, which is why everyone should tune in.”

But when asked Tuesday by reporters if his speech will touch “election machines and integrity,” Trump said that it would.

“It will concern that subject, and we’ll have other things to say also,” he said. “I’d rather save it, but it’s really big news, it’s really really big news, and our country has to shape up.”

White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson said in a statement that Trump is “committed to ensuring that Americans have full confidence in the administration of elections,” noting that this includes ensuring that non-citizens cannot vote and that voter rolls are up to date.

“The Civil Rights Act, National Voting Rights Act, and Help America Vote Act all give the Department of Justice full authority to ensure states comply with federal election laws, which mandate accurate state voter rolls,” Jackson said. “This campaign pledge from the President is why millions of Americans sent him back to the White House.”

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The EAC — the small government agency that Trump effectively sidelined last week [by removing its leadership](#) — manages [more than a billion dollars given by Congress to states to secure their elections](#) since 2018. These funds are used for everything from buying new equipment to cybersecurity training. The EAC also develops and updates the [Voluntary Voting System Guidelines](#), which are widely used to certify the security of voting equipment.

The move caught officials across the elections world by surprise, given the agency’s low profile. But Trump has sought to influence the agency before: He issued an [executive order in March of 2025](#) demanding the EAC change the national voter registration form to require proof of citizenship, which was [blocked by a federal judge](#). He also sought to block the EAC from distributing funds to states that did not adjust voter forms to have a citizenship check, [which was similarly blocked in court](#).

But now, while the commission can still distribute federal election security funds, it can’t make any new plans for the money, or approve changes to the guidelines, according to former EAC Commissioner Donald Palmer, a Republican, who downplayed the severity of the moves.

“I am confident in the men and women of the EAC that will continue to work every day to ensure the security and accuracy of voting systems used across the country,” said Palmer, who now serves as senior legal fellow for election integrity at the Heritage Foundation.

Others worried about what the commission might be used for in the future if Trump decided to stock it with election conspiracy theorists, for example.

“The long-term effect is new commissioners that tow this election denier line,” said Christopher Thomas, a former Michigan state elections director. “And they start messing with the best practices to insert their take on how the world ought to run, which is always very questionable when it comes to actually running elections. ... Who knows what they could do down the road with the guidelines for voting systems?”

Spokespeople for the EAC did not respond to multiple requests for comment on whether the distribution of federal election security funds would be impacted by the leadership changes, or on next steps for certifying the security of voting equipment.

Amid the concerns by election officials, the now-former EAC leaders are weighing their options. The decision to clean house at the EAC was taken after [the Supreme Court widened the president’s authority](#) to sack agency heads in a 6-3 decision last month.

Thomas Hicks, one of the fired Democratic EAC commissioners, said in an interview that he learned about his dismissal via email while arranging travel for this week’s National Association of Secretaries of State conference in South Dakota. He had no advance notice that the termination was coming and wasn’t given a specific reason for his firing.

“Basically, the email said on behalf of Donald J. Trump, your time as commissioner at the EAC is now terminated. Thank you for your service,” he said. “You know, thank you for your service, and that was it.”

He’s leaving all options on the table—including a potential lawsuit—as he considers his next steps.

But several top lawyers are skeptical that the Democrats could prevail if they took the Trump administration to court.

It “may be an uphill battle,” said Rick Hasen, director of the Safeguarding Democracy Project at University of California, Los Angeles. A White House official explicitly cited the recent Supreme Court ruling when [explaining the rationale for the firings on Thursday](#).

Other election security officials were more sanguine about the EAC officials’ dismissals—given the limited role the agency has—while still suggesting it is foreboding for the future. Washington Secretary of State Steve Hobbs, a Democrat, said in a statement Friday that “while this is a significant development, it does not immediately impact Washington’s elections,” and stressed that voting systems in Washington were secure and prepared for upcoming elections.

Amid the chaos in Washington, D.C., election officials are still working to keep the ship on course — even if Trump interferes further prior to November.

“No matter how much chaos this administration continues to try to create, I know that my colleagues and I remain resolved in our commitment to ensuring every eligible voter has an opportunity to safely and securely cast a ballot in November,” New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver (D) said.