BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE

New York

Top 5 Actions to Strengthen Election Security

American elections face an evolving landscape of security threats, from bomb threats and physical attacks on election infrastructure to cyberattacks and harassment of election workers. The 2024 election cycle saw hundreds of security incidents targeting polling locations, election offices, and ballot drop boxes, with many threats appearing to originate from foreign adversaries.

While coordinated state and local responses demonstrated effective ways to prevent and mitigate these threats, the federal government has significantly reduced its support for election security, undermining its role as a hub for coordination and communication. The Trump administration has frozen key cybersecurity programs, cut personnel, ended funding for information-sharing networks, and sought access to sensitive election systems and data.

With 60 percent of local election officials expressing concern about these federal cuts and 87 percent calling for additional state and local support,[1] it is critical for states to take the lead in protecting election security and safeguarding American democracy.

Recommendations:

1. **The State Legislature should pass a law to protect voting systems from unauthorized access.** The state legislature should pass a law that:
    - Provides a specific list of individuals who have authority to access voting systems and prohibits unauthorized individuals from accessing or attempting to access voting systems, or election workers from facilitating unauthorized access;
    - Adopts reasonable restrictions on party observers' access to voting systems;
    - Prohibits individuals from tampering with or interfering with voting systems;
    - Requires county boards of elections to notify the state board of elections immediately upon receipt of any request for third-party access to their county's voting system;
2. **The State Legislature and State Board of Elections should provide funding for key election cybersecurity tools and services.** The state legislature should work with the state board of elections to assess county boards' cyber capacity following cuts to federally-funded services (through EI-ISAC and MS-ISAC) and provide funding to ensure that election officials continue to have access to critical cybersecurity tools. Essential cybersecurity services for every county, including protective DNS, phishing campaign assessments, multifactor authentication, endpoint detection and response, and vulnerability scanning and management, would cost around $5,000 - $25,000 per county on average, though statewide contracts may be able to negotiate lower costs.

[1] Brennan Center for Justice, Local Election Officials Survey — July 2025, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/local-election-officials-survey-july-2025.

3. **The State Board of Elections should issue regulations and guidance on access to voting systems and election materials.** With or without additional legislation, the state board of elections should issue regulations to specify the list of individuals with authorization to access voting systems and require county boards of elections to notify the state board immediately upon receipt of any written or verbal request for third-party access to their county's voting system.
4. **The Governor should direct state agency leaders to identify opportunities for election security support and collaborate with the State Board of Elections through an inter-agency election security working group.** As the federal government cuts or deprioritizes support for cyber and physical security assessments, trainings, and incident response support, New York should explore how to replace this support and expertise at the state level.

   The governor should:

   - Direct leaders of relevant state agencies, including state IT, emergency management, homeland security, and law enforcement agencies, to assess internal resources and capacity available to assist election officials.
   - Establish an election security working group to coordinate with the state board and deliver services and support to county election officials.
5. **The Attorney General should educate election officials and law enforcement on laws governing threats to election workers and interference with election systems and processes.** The attorney general and other state law enforcement officials should:

   - Reach out to and educate law enforcement officers on election law and administration, since most officers have limited familiarity with these areas due to infrequent high-turnout elections and rare incidents.
   - Distribute reference guides that summarize relevant elections penal provisions, including prohibitions on voter intimidation, interference, and equipment tampering.
   - Work with the state board to ensure county election officials understand their requirements under federal and state law to protect election systems and voter data.

For more recommendations to secure elections, see the Brennan Center's recent report: A State Agenda for Election Security and Resiliency