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**Alliance for
Securing
Democracy**

Countering the Weaponization of Election Administration Mistakes



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About the Alliance for Securing Democracy at GMF

The Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a nonpartisan initiative that develops comprehensive strategies to deter, defend against, and raise the costs on autocratic efforts to undermine and interfere in democratic institutions. ASD has staff in Washington, DC, and Brussels, bringing together experts on disinformation, malign finance, emerging technologies, elections integrity, economic coercion, and cybersecurity, as well as Russia, China, and the Middle East, to collaborate across traditional stovepipes and develop cross-cutting frameworks.

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Introduction

When people perform tasks in a complex work environment, mistakes are bound to happen. Election systems are no exception. Although the 2020 presidential and 2022 midterm elections in the United States were free, fair, and well-administered, broadly speaking, some election officials made [mistakes](#) conducting them. However, in some jurisdictions, these mistakes were subsequently exploited to support unfounded claims of fraud, try to overturn fair elections, and further erode trust in US democracy. In an election environment defined by [hyperpolarization](#) and [election denialism](#), it is therefore more important than ever for election officials to understand how to respond to election administration mistakes in order to prevent and counter their weaponization.

Although trust in election administration is [higher now](#) than it was following the 2020 presidential election, bad faith actors continue to weaponize election administration mistakes. While election deniers [lost key races](#) in 2022 midterm elections, their efforts to undermine electoral systems have [proliferated and expanded](#) beyond claims that the 2020 election was stolen. In 2023 alone, legislatures in 38 states [have introduced](#) nearly 200 bills that would increase the risk of meddling in the vote counting process for future elections, often under the false pretenses of widespread fraud and incompetent election administration. While election administration failures do [exist](#), local election officials in Arizona, Nevada, and Pennsylvania attempted [to block](#) the certification of election results on little more than conjecture. And states [established](#) task forces to investigate speculative fraud allegations, rather than support election officials and their voters. Such actions [are likely](#) to continue, if not increase, in the run up to the 2024 election.

Moreover, elections face a [growing exodus](#) of election workers leaving the field. Election officials continue [to face](#) death threats, harassment, and abuse stemming from election lies. In some states, political leaders [have attempted to](#) silence or replace election officials who told the truth about election security, and impose criminal penalties for minor infractions. As a result, roughly one to two local election officials have left office every day since the 2020 election, and more than one in five election officials [are expected](#) to be serving in their first presidential election in 2024.

The loss of institutional knowledge that accompanies such high turnover [could mean](#) that the new cohort of election officials entering the field are less prepared to administer elections, resulting in more, or graver, administrative mistakes, which in turn could further undermine US democracy and fuel more conspiracies and threats.

This report examines administrative errors made in recent elections in Antrim County, Michigan, Harris County, Texas, and Maricopa County, Arizona, and surveys how these errors were subsequently alleged to be conclusive proof of malfeasance. For each election, the report describes:

1. The actual administrative error and how it occurred
2. Actions each jurisdiction took to address the error, including their communication with the public
3. The fallout from these errors, including how bad faith actors weaponized them to try to cast doubt on the integrity of the election

Drawing on these examples, the paper offers recommendations that election officials, state legislators, and other key stakeholders can adopt to both reduce the likelihood of future election administration mistakes and mitigate the impact of mistakes if they do occur. Together, these recommendations seek to prevent the weaponization of election administration errors to further undermine US elections.

Case Studies

Election Administration Mistakes, Responses, and Repercussions in Select Locations	Location	Mistake(s)	Actions Taken	Repercussions
	Antrim County, Michigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mishandled election design changes led to misreported election results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Posted statement on Facebook to notify public of the problem Regularly updated voters about the problem Emphasized election safeguards to the press Hired elections expert to conduct an analysis of voting equipment Published after-action report that identified areas for improvement and debunked false claims Conducted a full hand audit of all votes cast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> False claims blaming Dominion surged on social media Flawed report claimed Dominion “intentionally” caused election fraud Influential personalities amplified claims from flawed report Claims from flawed report cited in Trump’s illegal directive to seize voting equipment Claims from flawed report used to incite January 6 riot
	Harris County, Texas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More than a dozen vote centers ran out of ballot sheets Widespread reports of voting machine malfunctions, paper jams, and unusually long lines Several polling places opened late 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided mobile and in-person support for more than 1,600 help requests Posted wait times for vote centers on its website Conducted investigation into Election Day issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Losing candidates and parties filed lawsuits to overturn the election Texas lawmakers amplified false claims that Election Day problems were intentional State legislators passed laws to increase state and partisan control over elections
	Maricopa County, Arizona	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ballot toner was not dark enough for vote counting machines to read 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispatched printer technicians to assist vote centers Instructed voters of their voting options Published video on social media to inform voters about the problem Shared updates on social media and in the press Conducted two investigations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> False claims that mistakes were intentional surged online and were amplified by influential personalities Losing candidate filed a lawsuit against the county to overturn elections State lawmakers proposed a bill that would force Maricopa County to rerun the election

Antrim County, Michigan's 2020 Presidential Election

Mistakes

Antrim County is perhaps the most renowned example of election mistake weaponization, which helped propel former President Donald Trump's Big Lie conspiracy that the 2020 election was stolen. On the night of the 2020 general election, Antrim County [misreported](#) unofficial results by up to several thousand votes, showing a landslide victory for Joe Biden in an area that historically votes Republican. Although the misreporting was later attributed to human error, the incident [formed the basis](#) for a flurry of lawsuits and conspiracies that falsely claimed that the county's voting system vendor, Dominion Voting Systems (hereafter referred to as Dominion), had "rigged" the voting machines.

The problems experienced by Antrim County were the result of the county's mishandling of last-minute ballot design changes. As outlined in the county's official [investigation](#) of the incident, a month before the election, the county changed three ballot designs to correct various errors (such as adding missing candidates and contests, fixing voting procedures, etc.) for local contests in three precincts. However, the Antrim County clerk forgot to [update](#) the Dominion election management software to account for the design changes before the election.

This gaffe snowballed into a mountain of errors that transpired on Election Day. Although the Dominion ballot scanners [reportedly](#) functioned properly on Election Day, they were not updated to handle the new designs, causing the results to be inaccurate. Moreover, the ballot design changes unexpectedly altered candidate identifiers, which scanners use to record voter selections. When the memory cards that used the old identifiers were interpreted by the election management system using the new identifiers, votes were assigned to the wrong candidates, causing large errors in the initial reported results for most contests. Unfortunately, the county clerk—who finished generating the unofficial results on the website at 4:00am the day after the election—failed to notice the discrepancies before publishing the unofficial results, which she later [attributed to](#) exhaustion from long shifts. The discrepancies were brought to the county's attention a few hours later by an early-rising citizen and immediately taken down.

Actions Taken

While the election results were being reviewed, Antrim County took steps to resolve the problem and communicate it to the public. After learning of the problem, the Antrim County clerk immediately [posted](#) a statement on the county's Facebook page notifying the public of the problem. In the proceeding days, Michigan state and county officials also communicated with the public, stressing that there were no problems with the way votes were counted and recorded, and that there were safeguards in place that would have caught the inaccuracies before the election's certification. By the Friday after the election, Antrim County had posted revised results. In a press release that same day, the Michigan Department of State [confirmed](#) that the erroneous reporting "was the result of accidental error on the part of the Antrim County clerk".

To understand the full scope of the problem, as well as dispel false narratives that later arose because of the error, Antrim County hired [J. Alex Halderman](#), a University of Michigan professor of computer science and engineering who [specializes](#) in election security, to conduct an independent analysis of the voting equipment used in the county during the election. Halderman's [report con-](#)

[firmed](#) that the blunder was the result of human error, identified areas for improvement, and debunked false claims that had gained traction. Similarly, Antrim County also [conducted](#) a full hand audit of all votes cast for president to [affirm](#) the certified results.

Repercussions

While criticism of Antrim County's misreported election results was justified and to be expected, election officials could not have anticipated the extent to which bad faith actors would exploit these mistakes to promote conspiracies and cast doubt on the election's integrity. In the days following Antrim County's misreported election results, far-reaching claims blaming Dominion for the significant misreporting and accusing the company of attempted interference in the election [surged](#) on Twitter, despite the county's reassurances that the misreporting stemmed from human, not technological, error.

Despite the audit, conspiracies targeting Antrim County continued to gain traction. A Michigan state court [authorized](#) an investigation into Antrim County's election by the Allied Security Operations Group (ASOG), a fledgling company with no apparent expertise in election administration that also has [dubious connections](#) with a fringe election conspiracist. ASOG piggybacked on false assertions about Dominion and [published](#) a report three days before the results of the hand audit came out that claimed, without evidence, that Antrim County's voting machines had a 68% error rate. The report concluded that Dominion "intentionally and purposefully designed its voting software with inherent errors to create systemic fraud and influence election results". Although security experts and state officials [criticized](#) the ASOG report for its considerable [inaccuracies](#)—including describing software that Antrim County does not own and that is not compatible with the county's voting system—the report and its claims [gained](#) national traction and formed the basis for Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

False allegations that Dominion rigged the election were subsequently echoed by a slew of influential media outlets and personalities, such as Fox News, whose [reach in 2020 averaged](#) 1.9 million viewers a day and 3.6 million viewers during primetime. Trump's legal team also [used](#) the ASOG report's findings to pressure battleground state lawmakers to reject Biden's victory and presented it as a key justification for a [draft executive order](#) that would have directed federal troops to seize voting machines. Moreover, in his [speech](#) on January 6, 2021, Trump linked the Election Day problems in Antrim County to evidence of widespread voter fraud shortly before his supporters stormed the US Capitol.

Harris County, Texas' 2022 Midterm Election

Mistakes

Harris County has been [plagued](#) by various election issues in recent years, making it an appealing target for bad faith actors seeking to weaponize election administration mistakes to undermine elections. Following the 2020 presidential election, false claims of widespread voter fraud [reverberated](#) throughout Texas and inspired new voting laws that in some cases exacerbated election administration problems, especially in Harris County. For example, the state's [adoption](#) of [Senate Bill 7](#) in 2021 created unnecessary new vote-by-mail rules—including requiring voters to provide their driver's license or social security number on their mail ballot applications—and contributed to Harris County's rejection of 6,888 (19% of) mail ballots in the 2022 primary. More gravely, requirements to [continuously count ballots](#) once polls close on Election Day [contributed](#) to Harris County's failure to include 10,000 ballots in its original tabulation of unofficial 2022 primary results, as election workers reportedly [worked](#) multiple 40 hour shifts with minimal sleep to meet state deadlines.

It was against this backdrop that Harris County again encountered issues during the 2022 midterms. On Election Day, voting centers across the county again reported an array of problems. More than a dozen voting locations [ran out](#) of ballot sheets. As in [previous elections](#) in Harris County, there were widespread reports of voting machine malfunctions, paper jams, and unusually long lines. Several polling places [failed to open on time](#) for various reasons, including election workers quitting, not showing up, or not receiving the keys to operate voting equipment.

Actions Taken

Harris County took important [measures](#) to remedy the wide range of issues experienced on Election Day and inform the public. As the county received reports of issues, the Election Administrator's Office (EAO) provided support over the phone or dispatched technicians to respond to problems on site. EAO staff respond to more than 1,600 logged requests. Throughout Election Day, representatives from Harris County spoke to the press and [posted](#) polling location wait times on its website and social media profiles to help voters successfully cast ballots. Likewise, after a court order [required](#) all polling locations to extend voting by an hour until 8:00pm, the EAO swiftly contacted all necessary parties with details of the order, including voting center staff and judges, and dispatched staff to deliver provisional balloting materials (although the Texas Supreme Court later [overruled](#) the extension after more than 2,000 ballots were cast during the extended period).

To determine what had happened during the election and why these difficulties had occurred, Harris County [conducted](#) a post-election [assessment](#), which was published in late December 2022. Unfortunately, the investigation was "inconclusive" and could not answer important questions, such as whether Harris County's midterm troubles prevented any people from voting. Harris County's election director [explained](#) that the investigation had been limited because his office does not have a central system for tracking problems, so they had to rely on anecdotal information they received from the more than 700 election judges who worked the county's polling sites. Nonetheless, the investigation unearthed nothing to cast doubt on the legitimacy of its election results.

Additional reporting by the Houston Chronicle [found](#) that 20 out of the county's 782 polling places experienced a ballot shortage, which was far fewer than the 121 locations initially misreported by a local news outlet and subsequently cited by Texas lawmakers. The Houston Chronicle investigation

similarly [concluded](#) that there was no evidence that the Election Day issues prompted people not to vote in numbers great enough to change the outcome of the election.

Repercussions

Even though there is no evidence that Harris County's problems affected the outcomes of any 2022 races, the county quickly became the target of a slew of lawsuits seeking to overturn the results of certain elections, many of which were based on false claims of election interference. A few days after the election, the Harris County Republican Party [sued](#) the county, alleging that the paper shortages "[disenfranchised](#)" Republican voters. Twenty-two Republican candidates that lost their races also [filed lawsuits](#) against Harris County in an effort to overturn the results and order new elections. Although most of these candidates lost their races by 12,000 to 29,000 votes, they claimed that the Election Day problems in Harris County turned away thousands of voters whose ballots could have changed the outcome of those races. Some even [claimed](#), without evidence, that the Election Day problems were the result of "intentional fraud" and that the county illegally suppressed voters in high Republican turn-out locations.

Texas lawmakers further exploited Harris County's midterm troubles to pass legislation that increases state and partisan control over how elections are run and administered in the state's most populous Democratic county, and that creates unnecessary burdens for election administrators. One law, [Senate Bill 1750](#), eliminates the Harris County election administrator position effective September 1, and reverts those responsibilities back to the county clerk and county tax assessor. Another law, [Senate Bill 1933](#), enables the secretary of state to take over elections in Harris County on vague grounds. And another law, [Senate Bill 1070](#), allows Texas to pull out of the Electronic Registration Information Center, a bipartisan interstate cooperative that helps maintain accurate voter registration rolls. Like the lawsuits, many of the bills were based on the false claim that paper shortages were deliberately orchestrated to systematically disenfranchise Republican voters. While Texas state legislators are well within their rights to conduct oversight of local elections, and should be encouraged to do so, particularly when localities have trouble running an election, legislation like the above is misguided. A [proactive and periodic nonpartisan review process](#) appropriately funded and designed to support and assist all Texas counties with election process improvements is likely to be more effective than efforts that criminalize election workers for honest mistakes and target single counties with new structures and personnel in place.

Maricopa County, Arizona's 2022 Midterm Election

Mistakes

Like Harris County, Maricopa County faced heightened distrust leading up to the 2022 general election. During the 2020 presidential election, Maricopa County became a hotbed for election fraud conspiracies. Within hours of the polls closing, false claims swelled on social media that Maricopa County gave voters Sharpie pens to purposely invalidate their ballots. Despite Arizona election officials' assurances that voting machines were capable of reading Sharpie-marked ballots, "[SharpieGate](#)" quickly became a viral rallying call among Trump supporters to overturn the election. Moreover, multiple election deniers also [were on the ballot](#) in critical races in Arizona, including for governor and secretary of state. Maricopa County's highly contested election environment set the stage, so that when the county encountered printer issues during the 2022 midterms, bad faith actors were quick to exploit them.

Beginning almost immediately on the morning of Election Day, a number of vote centers [reported](#) that their vote-counting machines were having issues counting ballots. The problem, which [affected](#) approximately 60 vote centers (30% of all vote centers in the county), caused significant delays and long lines at some polling stations. Seven voting centers experienced lines of up to 80 to 115 minutes. It was later discovered that the toner on some of the ballots printed on site was not dark enough for the vote-counting machines to read the ballot properly.

Actions Taken

Maricopa County took proactive and commendable measures to quickly resolve the problem and communicate with the public. When the problem was first reported at 6:00am on Election Day, Maricopa County immediately called on IT staff and technicians from the printer company to assist vote centers. In accordance with [state procedure](#), election workers [instructed](#) voters to either deposit ballots into a secure ballot box ("Door 3") so they could be counted at Maricopa County's central counting facility, or encouraged voters to visit other nearby voting centers with shorter wait times to cast their ballots. Maricopa County also quickly informed the public of the issue, in part, to get ahead of false narratives that might arise. For example, the county published a short [video](#) on social media of Maricopa County Board of Supervisors Chair Bill Gates describing the problem and informing voters of their voting options. The county subsequently updated voters through public statements to the press and social media posts, and [posted](#) vote center wait times on social media and its website to help voters avoid long lines. The printer issues were resolved in the mid-afternoon.

To understand the full scope of the issue, Maricopa County conducted two investigations. Shortly after the midterm, Maricopa County [launched](#) its own inquiry into the Election Day issues. The [findings](#)—which were published less than three weeks after Election Day and before Maricopa County certified its results on December 5—outlined the Election Day printer problem and steps the county took to remedy it. Most importantly, the report affirmed that the printer glitches did not prevent anyone from voting.

An additional, [independent investigation conducted](#) by former Arizona Supreme Court Justice Ruth McGregor validated the county's findings and underscored that the printing issues were largely unforeseeable, [stating](#), "nothing in the printers' past performance or pre-election stress testing indicated that such failure was likely." McGregor concluded that the printer issues were caused by changes

to ballot paper length and thickness, which “pushed the printers to perform at the very edge of or past their capability”. Ironically, the change in ballot thickness was made to help [offset](#) conspiracies related to “SharpieGate”.

Repercussions

Like with “SharpieGate”, bad faith actors quickly [seized on](#) Maricopa County’s printing problem [to push](#) misleading and false information. The Election Integrity Partnership [recorded](#) more than 40,000 tweets about Maricopa County’s printing issue before noon on Election Day, many of which alleged that the machine failures were deliberate. These narratives were [amplified](#) by a chorus of influential right-wing personalities who encouraged voters to ignore election administration guidance to use “Door 3” and instead wait in line.

Kari Lake, Arizona’s Republican nominee for governor and an [outspoken election denier](#), lambasted the county’s election management, claimed malfeasance, and [called for](#) Maricopa County’s election officials to be “locked up” after she [lost](#) the candidacy by just over 17,000 votes. Following the election’s certification, Lake [filed](#) a lawsuit to overturn the election results in Maricopa County, alleging that the long lines drove would-be Republican voters away and that “illegal votes” were included in the tally. Although Arizona courts [repeatedly dismissed](#) or rejected Lake’s legal claims, partisan lawmakers continue to echo her doubts about the election. Arizona State Senator Jake Hoffmann, for example, [proposed](#) a [bill](#) that would require Maricopa County to rerun its election, arguing that long lines were a form of “voter disenfranchisement”.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing on these case studies, this paper offers recommendations to help state legislators, election administrators, and other key stakeholders prevent and combat the weaponization of election administration mistakes. The recommendations are grouped into two categories. The first set of recommendations aims to help jurisdictions reduce the likelihood of making mistakes in the future. We acknowledge, however, that some mistakes are unforeseeable, as illustrated by the Maricopa County case study. Therefore, the second group of recommendations seeks to help jurisdictions mitigate the impact of mistakes when they do happen and counter actors who might try to weaponize the mistake to further cast doubt on the legitimacy of a given election. Admittedly, many of the recommendations discussed below may be harder for smaller jurisdictions to adopt due to obstacles such as limited expertise, time, and personnel. Many also require additional funding, which is inconsistent across states and unreliable at the federal level. In order to support state and local election jurisdictions where they need it most, the United States must devise a way to appropriately and consistently fund elections.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Reducing the Likelihood of Election Mistakes

1. Conduct a dry run of the voting process before Election Day	2. Conduct tabletop exercises for different threat scenarios, including how to respond to election mis- and disinformation
3. Standardize recruitment and training for all poll workers	4. Develop and institute a succession plan to train new election officials and retain institutional knowledge
5. Enact measures that expand vote counting timelines to prioritize accuracy over speed	6. Increase robust, nonpartisan election observation

Recommendations for Mitigating the Impact of Mistakes if They Do Occur

1. Expand the use of post-election audits nationwide	2. Provide election offices with the resources necessary to conduct a landscape review of potential vulnerabilities they might have
3. Develop a crisis communications plan for responding to election administration mistakes	4. Publish after-action reports following significant election administration mistakes

Recommendations for Reducing the Likelihood of Election Mistakes

Conduct a dry run of the voting process—such as mock elections or testing of voting systems—before Election Day

Conducting a dry run of the election can prepare election workers and help them identify potential vulnerabilities ahead of Election Day. There are several types of dry runs that jurisdictions could consider administering, including mock elections or testing of voting systems, where they inspect election hardware and software to determine if it is functioning properly. For localities introducing new election technology or procedures—or simply facing a skeptical public—election dry runs often allow election workers to test and evaluate the voting process in a less charged environment, as well as identify vulnerabilities and their solutions.

For example, after its decision to adopt electronic pollbooks, Pima County, Arizona [conducted](#) two mock elections to allow voters the opportunity to experience the new voting system and equipment ahead of the 2022 primary. Not only did the two mock elections alleviate public doubt about the new voting process, but they also [helped](#) staff understand the new process and identify areas of improvement in how the county should prepare for and administer its election.

In addition, jurisdictions should also consider incorporating “controlled disruption” into their dry runs. For example, in 2010 the District of Columbia’s Board of Elections [issued](#) an open invitation for hackers to break into a pilot system that would allow overseas and military voters to cast their ballots online, which a team from the University of Michigan quickly succeeded in doing. The hacking pointed to tangible vulnerabilities in the online voting system, which subsequently led the district to scale back this online voting effort. Similar hacking exercises, as well as other various controlled disruptions—such as intentionally not providing enough ballot paper during a mock election to mimic a paper shortage—can both help test the security of equipment and better prepare election officials for different scenarios that might occur.

It is important to note that conducting a dry run or mock election requires significant time, staff, and financial support; therefore, many jurisdictions cannot accomplish them without outside assistance. Election timelines can also create complications, as some places—like Arizona—may have little time to do these sorts of exercises between certain elections.

Conduct tabletop exercises for different threat scenarios, including how to respond to election mis- and disinformation

Like dry runs, tabletop exercises are an important tool in preparing for secure elections. Multi-agency, multi-disciplinary tabletop exercises help election officials and other key stakeholders both identify and rehearse response plans for various physical and cyber threats. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) offers important guidance for developing tabletop exercises. For example, CISA’s [Elections Cyber Tabletop Exercise Package](#) includes template exercise objectives, scenarios, and discussion questions designed to help key stakeholders initiate discussions within their organization about their ability to address potential threats to election infrastructure. CISA also hosts [Tabletop the Vote](#), an annual election security exercise that brings together federal partners, state and local election officials, and vendors to collaborate on best practices and areas for improvement related to election security.

Because false information about elections has led to an increase in [attempted tampering](#) of voting equipment and harassment of both [election workers](#) and [voters](#), tabletop exercises should also include scenarios with disruptive false election information, so election offices can develop action plans for how they can best counter it. These plans should consider strategies for debunking false narratives and distributing correct information to the public in a timely manner.

Standardize recruitment and training for all poll workers

Poll workers play an [indispensable role](#) in election administration. These individuals—who temporarily staff polling stations and assist with a wide variety of election administration duties, often without compensation—help ensure elections run smoothly and fairly. The United States relied on approximately [one million](#) poll workers to help administer the 2022 midterm elections.

Yet, the United States [is facing](#) a critical shortage of poll workers, which threatens the integrity of future election administration. This problem is further exacerbated by a [lack of standardization](#) in poll worker recruitment, training, and funding across states and localities, which makes some jurisdictions more at risk of mistakes due to having less qualified staff. While most states have requirements to train poll workers for a few hours, eight states, including Texas, do not mandate any form of training. Likewise, smaller jurisdictions often have less funding, resources, and time, to allocate for poll workers.

Poll workers need sufficient training, detailed instruction, and [continual vetting](#) to ensure they can perform their job properly and prevent others from interfering with the voting process. Furthermore, as a general rule, voters shouldn't have to wait [more than 30 minutes](#) to vote. Achieving both these goals is less likely if poll workers do not have sufficient training. In line with jurisdictions like the [District of Columbia](#), all poll workers should be required to complete a minimum of four hours of in-person training every two years. Poll workers in supervisory positions should have additional training beyond the minimum four hours. Training for poll workers in both clerical and manager positions can be supplemented by online resources, including training modules, interactive tools, and videos.

As the Maricopa County case study demonstrated, no amount of training can cover how to handle all potential Election Day issues, but several hours of training could go a long way towards learning how to handle most problems.

Develop and institute a succession plan to train new election officials and retain institutional knowledge

Amid [massive turnover](#) in local election offices, it is more important than ever to ensure that the new cohort entering the field is sufficiently equipped to take over the management of elections from their predecessors. As with the operation of any business or organization, comprehensive succession planning can help guarantee a seamless transition in leadership.

When developing succession plans and guidelines for training new election workers, election offices should consider how knowledge from the departing workers will be transferred and create a timeline for transferring that knowledge. Departing election officials should document the tasks for which they are primarily responsible and update standard operating procedures. If applicable, departing election officials should also note if there are outdated procedures for certain tasks, provide sugges-

tions to improve operations, and hand off projects to other staff that they were not able to complete.

Enact measures that expand vote counting timelines to prioritize accuracy over speed

The Harris County case study illustrated how ill-intentioned legislation and changes to voting procedures can increase election administration problems. Sweeping changes to Texas's voting laws—which were mostly driven by baseless claims of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election—resulted in thousands of rejected mail-in-ballots across the state during the 2022 primary. Furthermore, requirements to [continuously count ballots](#) once polls closed on election night contributed to Harris County's [initial failure](#) to include 10,000 ballots in its original tabulation of unofficial results, as officials reportedly worked multiple 40-hour shifts with minimal sleep to meet deadlines.

The pressure on election officials—from the news media, candidates, political parties, and others—to quickly publish results (both unofficial and official) has led some states to develop very short, potentially problematic timelines for counting votes. This can put election administrators in a quandary between speed and accuracy. To mitigate this, election officials and lawmakers should look at measures that make it easier for election workers to comfortably count ballots in a timely manner. For example, some states should consider widening the window for [pre-processing](#) mail-in ballots. In line with Maryland's [House Bill 535](#) that was [enacted](#) in April 2023, election officials should be given 8 business days before the election to process mail-in ballots, which would not only lessen the burden on election workers, but could also help prevent bad faith actors from exploiting the delayed release of mail-in voting results to sow doubts on the election. States could also consider legislation that [sets](#) election certification deadlines for no earlier than 14 days after a general election to provide election officials with time to complete pre-certification tasks, as well as legislation that gives election officials until certification day to submit official election results.

Not only would expanded timelines improve the accuracy of elections; they could actually help expedite the counting process and make it more secure. However, real improvements in this area will also require that more of the public becomes tolerant of and knowledgeable about longer voting processes.

Increase robust, nonpartisan election observation

More robust nonpartisan election observation, both domestic and international, [could serve](#) as a critical tool for ensuring the integrity of future elections. Unlike partisan observation—which often looks for activity that could undermine an opponent's candidacy or interests—nonpartisan observers should be trained to understand the election procedures as specified by law and report on whether Election Day procedures are correctly followed. Credible, nonpartisan election observation not only helps validate the critical work being done by those on the front lines of our democracy, but it can also increase public confidence in elections by actively checking bad-faith actors, promoting transparency, and providing important information to better secure and improve election processes. In some cases, domestic nonpartisan observers can even monitor for irregularities in real time; during voting, such observers can alert election headquarters to issues such as electioneering, supply shortages, or tampering with a piece of voting equipment at a precinct, which can help officials respond to complaints and concerns in a timely manner.

Fulton County, Georgia—a place at the core of false assertions that the 2020 presidential election was rigged—is a prime example of the benefits of nonpartisan observation. At the request of a bipartisan group of Georgia election officials, domestic nonpartisan observers agreed [to monitor](#) the 2022 midterm elections in person. Relying in large part on the observations of these non-partisan observers, the bipartisan group of election officials [recommended](#) against a state takeover of Fulton County elections and called for a more nonpartisan process going forward.

Even though it can be an important safeguard for election integrity, many states [have restrictions](#) on nonpartisan election observers. Fifteen states prohibit Election Day observation from international observers, and some other states only allow voters registered in the respective state or county to act as observers. In line with [international practice](#), those states and jurisdictions that do not yet allow access to international and citizen nonpartisan observers at all stages of the electoral process should reconsider. Likewise, rules should be in place in each state to help prevent any election observer from interfering in the administration of elections.

Recommendations for Mitigating the Impact of Mistakes if They Do Occur

Expand the use of post-election audits nationwide

Post-election audits are one of the best measures to confirm the accuracy of an election and ensure it was not marred by error or fraud. There are several approaches to audits, including percentage-based audits, which review a certain percentage of the total voted ballots cast in a jurisdiction, and [risk-limiting audits](#), which review a certain percentage of ballots in relation to the margin of victory. The latter [are considered](#) the “gold standard” because they require fewer ballots to be reviewed, but they still provide statistical confidence in the election results.

While most states require post-election audits in some form, the majority of audits are [conducted](#) after results are already certified. This is primarily due to a lack of time. However, amid increasing skepticism in the election process, there are clear benefits to conducting audits pre-certification, notably the ability to amend election results in the event the audit identifies discrepancies. Conducting election audits before the results are certified can ensure votes are recorded and counted accurately, as well as help alleviate concerns about the integrity of an election. This is especially important in localities that have made mistakes in administering their election or in places where there is greater distrust in election administration. While audits may not always change the mind of certain voters or quell all conspiracies, as was the case in Antrim County, they are nonetheless one of the most important tools election officials have to validate an election.

Provide election offices with the resources necessary to conduct a landscape review of potential vulnerabilities they might have, such as a central system for tracking all Election Day problems

Many of the Election Day problems reported in Harris County during the 2022 midterms, such as late polling site openings and paper ballot shortages, could occur in any election. While Harris County went to great lengths to resolve its widespread issues during the midterms, it [did not have](#) a central system for tracking problems to determine the full scope of what went wrong. Instead, in its investigation of Election Day issues, the Harris County election director [explained](#) that he had to rely on anecdotal feedback from election staff and the logged help requests made to the call center.

Today, a variety of election vendors nationwide offer central software—which can be personalized to meet the specific needs of certain jurisdictions—that can troubleshoot timelines for a problem, such as tracking how long it takes technicians to respond, whether the issue was resolved, and how long it took to fix the problem. Such tools are crucial for crisis management and can help election officials identify core administration vulnerabilities, fix them before the next election, and provide comprehensive feedback to the public about what happened.

Develop a crisis communications plan for responding to election administration mistakes

As the ultimate authority on elections, it is the key responsibility of an election office [to act](#) as the official resource for timely and accurate election information. This responsibility has become even more critical due to the rise of election-related disinformation and the increasing polarization of the media environment. Election offices must prioritize communication strategies that bolster public confidence in US elections.

A necessary, but often neglected, component of a successful communications strategy is the [crisis communications plan](#). Every office should have a crisis communications plan in place that lays out how officials should respond to election administration mistakes and other crises. These plans should prioritize timely reporting, transparency, and honesty, as Maricopa County's did when it encountered printing problems. Acknowledging the mistake and clarifying its cause as early as possible helps election offices get ahead of the story before others can mischaracterize it. More importantly, it helps prevent the appearance of intentional misconduct and the creation of a vacuum that can be filled by less reliable sources, further maintaining or bolstering trust in the voting system.

In addition to acknowledging the mistake early on, election offices should create a strategy for informing the public of accurate information and debunking any false information that might arise from the mistake. Beneficial tools for quickly distributing truthful information to consider include email notifications, media advisories and press releases, text message alerts, and social media posts. This strategy should also include, if applicable, what options voters still have to successfully cast a ballot during the election; both Harris County and Maricopa County did this by posting polling place wait times on their websites and social media accounts. Moreover, good working relationships with the news media and other key stakeholders are critical for crisis plans, as reporters and influential partners can both help circulate factual information and dispel false claims. This is particularly important for smaller jurisdictions that have less capacity to continuously communicate to the public on their own.

Publish after-action reports following significant election administration mistakes

Serious election administration errors, such as those described in each of the three case studies, justify [after-action reports](#) by the jurisdiction in which the errors occurred, as both Harris and Maricopa Counties attempted to do. Such reports must evaluate the mistakes' impact on the conduct of the election and describe any procedures that the election office took to resolve the problems, including by specifying the extent to which the mistakes impacted voters and results. Furthermore, such reports should share the steps the jurisdiction plans to take to ensure that the problems do not recur to restore public trust. Such reports should also consider examining and dismissing false claims that might have arisen from the mistakes, like Halderman's report did following Antrim County's 2020 presidential election.

While it is important that these reports are published within a timely manner—preferably within three months of the election—the severity and scope of the issue could require an additional or more extensive independent investigation by a well-respected outside entity, as was the case with McGregor's investigation on Maricopa County's printing issues. Although both internal and external investigations can be critical to helping an election office move forward, they can [be costly](#), and require significant time, resources, and personnel.

Conclusion

Like any large, complex system, election systems are vulnerable to mistakes. While the US election system has many safeguards in place to help ensure its integrity, it is not perfect. Unfortunately, some of its imperfections are increasingly being weaponized to erode faith in US elections. The three case studies in this report highlight the dangerous consequences that mistakes can have in an environment defined by polarization and election denialism. If election officials are to succeed in rebuilding the public's trust in future elections, it is critical that they and their legislative partners adopt strategies that not only reduce the likelihood of mistakes occurring but help mitigate their consequences if they do happen.