



MAXIMIZE PARTICIPATION & EQUITABLE ACCESS

Principle 2(a): Political structures and electoral systems should be designed to maximize participation of and provide equitable access to all citizens in a society.

Mosiah 29:32

» GOALS

- To create a democracy that is responsible to all citizens.
- To maximize citizen participation in the electoral process by identifying and abolishing obstacles to equitable access in that process.

» SCRIPTURE STUDY

"[T]he Lord . . . doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile."

— 2 Nephi 26:33

"Now it is not common that the voice of the people desireth anything contrary to that which is right; but it is common for the lesser part of the people to desire that which is not right; therefore this shall ye observe and make it your law—to do your business by the voice of the people." — Mosiah 29:26

"Allow ALL the governed an equal voice in the government, and that, and that only is self-government." — Abraham Lincoln, 1854

The Book of Mormon instructs us to "do your business by the voice of the people" (Mosiah 29:26). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also works this principle into its governance, stating that "all things shall be done by common consent in the church" (D&C 26:2). America, the world's oldest democratic republic, was likewise founded on this very principle.

And yet, "we the people" originally included only property-owning white men. The expansion of the right to vote has been a continuous battle fought by patriotic idealists throughout our country's history. They have remained committed to the vision that our democracy works best when all eligible voters — regardless of race, gender, political affiliation, and state or neighborhood — can participate and have their voices heard. Indeed, the Book of Mormon further instructs that "all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33). If so, then an ethical government, which "deriv[es] its] just powers from the consent of the governed" ([Declaration of Independence](#)), must respond to the voices of all citizens. We must support equitable access for all eligible voters in our electoral process.

Unfortunately, the contentious debate about who can claim the full rights of citizenship began at our nation's inception and continues to this day. Voter suppression, gerrymandering, census undercounts, disregard for norms and the rule of law, and campaign finance laws that give corporations more power than individuals all undermine this core principle of equal representation. That idea — that every citizen should have an equal voice — is [what Lincoln defined as the very foundation of self-government](#).

Three interconnected mechanisms function to ensure American voices are represented: the **census**, the **vote**, and **representation**. We will review each one, provide resources to learn more about them, discuss obstacles and even attacks on that mechanism, and share solutions to those obstacles.

Normative guidelines and the **rule of law** safeguard these mechanisms and uphold our democratic system. Candidates and campaigns must abide by norms and the rule of law so that elections are not bought, power distribution enables average Americans to run, and voter confidence and participation are encouraged. Federal and state laws and limits on executive action (including those administered by the bipartisan [Federal Elections Commission](#)) play an important role, but compliance with normative guidelines, not just compliance with the letter of the law, is what keeps our government functioning and ethical.

» CENSUS: Every Person Counts

The first U.S. census was held in 1790, the same year the last of the original 13 colonies ratified the Constitution. As per Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution, the census — unlike the vote — is intended to count every person living in the U.S. (including noncitizens). The information gathered is [reported and then used](#) to apportion representation in the U.S. House of Representatives. [The census](#), then, is the basis for our representative democracy.

Obstacle: Census Undercount

When a census is [underfunded](#), [cut short](#), or [otherwise compromised](#), Americans are [denied full representation](#) in the halls of government.

Learn More

- The [U.S. census website](#) is a treasure trove of information. For example, learn here [how school funding is affected by the census](#).
- Here you will find [an in-depth report on the 2020 census](#), created by MWEG.
- Know how [federal laws protect census data](#) or [how reapportionment is affected by the census](#).

Take Action

- [Let your members of Congress know](#) you want a fully funded census with adequate time to collect data.
- Use the [U.S. Census Bureau toolkit](#) to hold creative and collaborative workshops to foster new partnerships and solve census challenges in your community.

» VOTE: One Person, One Vote

The American revolutionary and essayist [Thomas Paine stated](#): “The right of voting for representatives is the primary right by which other rights are protected.” For all other rights to be protected, particularly the rights of minority populations, it is absolutely critical that every eligible American citizen has access to and the ability to participate in the vote.

Obstacle: Voter Suppression

The viability of our democracy depends on valid, fair, and representative elections. Fortunately, instances of voter fraud are few and very far between; in fact, [it is more likely that an American “will be struck by lightning than that he will impersonate another voter at the polls.”](#) This good news means our elections are generally valid. We must continue to ensure election security.

However, in the name of ferreting out fraud, politicians in dozens of states have erected barriers to voting; this means our elections are less fair and representative. [Barriers include](#) reducing polling place hours in communities of color, cutting early voting opportunities, and illegally purging voters from the rolls. Even [voter ID](#) and proof-of-citizenship restrictions can deprive voters of their right to vote and reduce participation, because many Americans — [disproportionately low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, and people with disabilities](#) — do not have the forms of identification required. Sadly, states with the greatest restrictions are often states with long histories of suppressing the votes of Black Americans. The [weakening of the Voting Rights Act](#) in 2013 by the Supreme Court in [Shelby County v. Holder](#) has allowed a second generation of voting barriers to arise in places with a sizable minority population.

As an alternative to voter ID laws, [automatic voter registration](#) triggers voter registration when a specific interaction with a government agency requires proof of identity. Then, at the time of voting, options verify a person's identification, such as mail-in ballots that are tracked with unique barcodes to match signatures and voter address.

Learn More

- **Voter suppression explained:** *The Brennan Center for Justice maintains [a page about voter suppression](#), sharing resources, reports, and articles on how eligible voters are kept from the polls. The League of Women Voters shares other [good resources on the topic of voter suppression](#). One in-depth look is Carol Anderson's book, "[One Person, No Vote](#)."*
- **Voter ID laws** can raise unnecessary obstacles to voting, as explained in these resources from the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#) and the [American Civil Liberties Union](#).
- **Access to polling places:** *In the first five years since the U.S. Supreme Court [struck down key parts of the Voting Rights Act](#), nearly 1,000 [polling places were shuttered across the country](#). Compounded with underfunding of elections, this has led to issues like [10-hour lines](#) at the outset of early voting in Georgia in the 2020 elections. Many of these are in Black communities in the South, making it more difficult for these communities to vote.*

Take Action

- **Research legislation that has been proposed to support access to the vote.** *Contact your members of Congress if you believe they should [restore the full protections of the Voting Rights Act](#) and your state representatives to encourage states to supplement those protections.*
- **Protect eligible voters from improper purges of the voter rolls.** *Congress and states can pass laws ensuring eligible voters aren't disenfranchised by improper purges.*
- **Help register others to vote.** *The [League of Women Voters](#) is involved in voter registration, and in Utah, [Voterise](#) is a great way to get involved. [Rock the Vote](#) is particularly targeted at young voters.*

>> REPRESENTATION: Accountability to American Citizens

For democracy to work well, elected officials must be accountable to their constituents. [As the Supreme Court has found](#), gerrymandering obstructs accountability and erases the need for collaboration. As a result, politicians and policies become more extreme. [Campaign finance laws can also impede accountability](#) if they do not ensure the average American's vote counts more than donations from businesses that can spend big to protect their own interests.

Obstacle: Gerrymandering

Following every census, a reapportionment occurs to establish voting districts. [When drawn well](#), these districts reflect the diversity of constituents and hold elected officials accountable. [When drawn with partisan or political interests in mind](#), politicians choose their voters rather than voters choosing their politicians. This takes power away from citizens and prevents equitable representation.

The term gerrymandering is named after Elbridge Gerry, who, as governor of Massachusetts in 1812, [created a partisan district in the Boston area that was compared to the shape of a salamander.](#)

Learn More

- **Learn about extreme gerrymandering** from various sources, including [FairVote](#), [The Brennan Center](#), the [New York Times](#), and [Reclaim the American Dream](#).
- This [handbook on redistricting reform](#) from [Common Cause](#) gives explanations and solutions.

Take Action

Support fair redistricting. [Fairvote.org](#) gives [an overview of the redistricting processes](#):

- **Nonpartisan citizen redistricting commissions** must be multipartisan and [independent](#). [Redistricting plans](#) require support from all parties involved and a consensus or super majority of members of commission.
- **Criteria-driven commission or civil servant approach.** [Iowa has done this](#) since 1980. A nonpartisan legislative staff draws district maps for legislative and congressional districts. The maps, by law, cannot consider partisan factors or the effect on officeholders. This system keeps all sides accountable to voters.
- **Bipartisan commission approach.** District maps are drawn by a bipartisan commission according to criteria set by statute. There is a public interest tiebreaker. [Virginia uses this system.](#)

Obstacle: Campaign Finance Law

The sources behind most of the money raised by politicians and political groups are publicly disclosed. When the source of political money is unknown, it's called dark money. The amount of dark money increased substantially following the [Supreme Court's Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission decision](#) in 2010, which essentially removed limits on donations from corporations and "[reversed century-old campaign finance restrictions and enabled corporations and other outside groups to spend unlimited funds on elections.](#)"

During the 2012 election cycle, dark money groups pumped about [\\$300 million](#) into political messages that called for the election or defeat of federal candidates, according to the nonpartisan [Center for Responsive Politics](#). Additionally, dark money groups spent hundreds of millions of dollars on political advertisements that focused more on issues than candidates.

Such donations take away the power of the individual vote. Campaign finance law is intended to set campaign contribution limits, disclosure requirements, independent expenditure requirements, and more.

Learn More

- Support [local or state measures](#) that call for campaign finance reforms.
- Look up your [state campaign finance laws here](#).

Take Action

- Write candidates who you support to **ask where their donations come from** to help hold them accountable.
- Support candidates who are **grassroots-funded**.

ACCESS & REPRESENTATION



Look for this banner on other MWEG materials to learn more about the importance of access and representation.

Ideas for Teaching Children

- **Teach about voting:** Use a [simple video](#) to teach the concept of voting. Illustrate the concept by having a family vote about something that impacts your child's day, such as what to make for dinner, what game to play, or what book to read. Ask how they feel when they get to take part in an important decision through voting. What happens when your choice is not the choice of others? Older kids may also wish to connect their experiences of student body elections or mock presidential elections at school with those on the state and national levels. Are elections just a popularity contest, or does someone win because they have the best ideas?
- **Discuss voter suppression:** In your family voting scenario, introduce an arbitrary division — everyone with green eyes, or everyone with an E in their name — and ask how they would feel if they were not allowed to participate in the vote. Alternatively, if you have young (shorter) kids, you might say everyone is allowed to vote but you have to get your own ballot first — which has been placed on a tall shelf. Some will be able to get theirs easily while others will have a much harder time. Then discuss real-life examples of voter suppression. With older children, review [this timeline of voting rights](#) and discuss how some people were denied the vote due to wealth, race, or gender.
- **Teach about the census:** The U.S. Census Bureau created the Statistics in Schools program, which offers [free learning activities and resources](#) for children in pre-K through 12th grade that can easily be used at home.
- **Complete the census:** If the census is currently being run and your family has not yet completed it, do it together! Encourage other relations and friends to do it too. Everybody counts!

Thought Questions

- Why is maximizing participation in electoral processes and political structures important to ethical government?
- Why is equitable access for all citizens important to ethical government? What happens if some citizens do not have the same access to the vote and to representation?
- Has your participation or access ever been limited? If no, tell why you care about maximizing participation and access for other Americans?
- What stories from history, other parts of the world, or America itself demonstrate to you why maximizing participation and access is important?
- The right to vote is an ongoing battle. How are some groups having their votes suppressed? Or which groups of people are in need of support to make sure their voices are heard through the voting process?
- How does having more people able to conveniently vote benefit all of us? What are some ways more voters could be encouraged and enabled to participate in voting?
- Are there people who should not have a right to vote? Why?
- Is your current congressional district balanced or gerrymandered? How does this affect your ability to have your voice heard in our representative government?
- Ask yourself: Would I care more or less if those whose votes are suppressed vote like me or vote differently than me? If so, how can I address this internal bias so I truly internalize my stated value that everyone's vote should count?