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Racial Justice
is on the Ballot

...and What *You* Can Do About It



ANTIRACIST RESEARCH
& POLICY CENTER

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY • WASHINGTON, DC

Antiracist Research & Policy Center

Race & the Elections

Why This Guide?

No elected official or single election will transform our society to one of full racial equity and justice. But still, for 150 years, Black and brown people in the US have fought for the freedom to vote. *Why?*

Elections are terrains of struggle where issues are exposed, movements are built, and foundations are laid for the ongoing work of collective freedom.

No, voting won't save us. But it's a tool for creating the conditions for us to save ourselves.

Elections Matter—because racial justice is always on the ballot.

This is a guide to how and why race matters for **six key issues** in this election cycle...and what you can do about it.

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Reproductive Justice

This election, the issue of abortion access has been front and center. With 60 percent of Black and American Indian & Alaska Native (AIAN) women living in states with near-total or total bans, access to abortion care is a critical racial justice issue. **But reproductive justice is about more than abortion.**

Health equity: Black and AIAN birthing people have 2–3 times the maternal mortality rates of white birthing people. They're more likely to live in 'maternity care deserts'—US counties with low or no perinatal care services. Even where reproductive care is available, it's not equally accessible: Black and Latine people statistically more likely to rely on federally-funded Title X family planning clinics, which provide health care for uninsured, low-income communities. Constant right-wing efforts to restrict and defund Title X clinics make BIPOC access to reproductive health care harder to predict and access.

Criminalizing Pregnancy: Under fetal protection laws, poor Black pregnant people are the most likely to be blamed and criminalized for drug use or poor pregnancy outcomes.

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1 Reproductive Justice

What to Watch For :

- **Nine states have measures on the ballot to make abortion access a constitutional right (AZ, CO, FL, MD, MO, MT, NE, NV, SD).** In four states, this would override current abortion bans.
- **New York's Prop 1** goes beyond the right to have an abortion, enshrining the right to reproductive autonomy for all pregnancies and pregnancy outcomes in the State constitution.
- In his last term, the **Trump administration's Domestic Gag Rule** shrank the number of Title X family planning clinics by a third. Trump has promised to reintroduce these regulations.
- The next session of Congress will be the third attempt to pass the **"Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act"** to reduce racial disparities in reproductive health and wellbeing. Success will require a critical mass of RJ supporters in both chambers.

Policing & Incarceration

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With 1.9 million people behind bars, the US has the **world's largest per capita incarceration rate**. While US crime rates have dropped by about 50% in the last 30 years—3% this year alone—US spending on policing and prisons is at an all time high of over \$220 billion each year.

Nearly half of American adults have an immediate family member who has been behind bars, but **poor people of color—particularly Black people—are disproportionately trapped in the criminal legal system**.

Most people in prison are poor; the poorest are BIPOC and white women. Meanwhile, Black people continue to be disproportionately arrested, convicted, and incarcerated. They are jailed at 3x the rate and imprisoned at 5x the rate of whites.

This leads to raced and classed disenfranchisement: There are over 19 million former felons in the US who are barred from voting in over half US states. **Nearly 5% of Black citizens are barred from voting because of a felony conviction.**

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2 Policing & Incarceration


What to Watch For :

- **4 states have ballot measures** to lengthen prison sentences, reduce bail access, expand definitions of crime, and/or increase funding for law enforcement (AZ, CA, CO, MO).
- As a senator, Kamala Harris introduced the “George Floyd Justice in Policing Act.” Currently she is running on a **‘law and order’ platform** and supported the Biden Administration’s \$20 billion in funding for state law enforcement that put 100,000 new police on the streets.
- In 2018, Donald Trump signed the First Step Act to reduce some mandatory minimum prison sentences and allow judges and prosecutors greater discretion in sentence reduction. Currently, **he has promised to increase police powers, reduce oversight, ensure immunity to prosecution, and expand the number of death-penalty eligible offenses.**

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War & Militarization



When money is funneled to war and imperial control, **devastating communities of color abroad, it is also withheld from the services BIPOC communities at home need to stay safe and well.** In 2020, for example, the entire Department of Education received a smaller federal budget than the US paid in contracts to Lockheed Martin.

U.S. military spending expanded to \$825 billion in 2023; by far the most in the world and more than the nine next largest spenders, including China, Russia, and the U.K., combined. Over the past year, the US has sent \$17.9 billion in military aid to Israel, directly contributing to the killing of Palestinians, and displacement of over 1.9 million.

In 2025, national lawmakers will continue to make decisions on aid to Israel, militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, and deployment of troops to Asia and the Pacific. State and local officials will also play roles in supporting and resisting these efforts.

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War & Militarization

What to Watch For :

- **Neither Donald Trump nor Kamala Harris have committed to demanding a ceasefire in Gaza.** However, independent candidates such as Cornel West, Jill Stein, Claudia De La Cruz, and Chase Oliver have.
- All 86 of the **House Members** who have spoken out in favor of a ceasefire are up for re-election this fall.
- Over 100 cities and towns have passed ceasefire resolutions already, and activists in many other towns are pushing their city council to adopt such resolutions. **City council races** will determine who is empowered to make such decisions.

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Immigration



US immigration laws precipitate the disproportionate targeting, jailing, and destruction of families of color. Discriminatory policing tactics, such as stop and frisk, broken windows policing, and racially motivated traffic stops (“driving while black or brown”), have far-reaching repercussions for immigrants of color, placing them at greater risk of both criminal arrest and prolonged detention and deportation.

Immigration detention is the fastest growing incarceration system in the U.S. Since Biden took office in 2021, the number of people held in ICE detention has nearly doubled. These facilities disrupt and destroy families, and are sites of endemic sexual violence. And because 90% of the 30,000 people held daily in ICE detention are at private facilities, detention generates billions of dollars in corporate revenue.

Furthermore, immigrants of color are at disproportionate risk for discrimination and exploitation in the workplace. This can take the form of wage theft, exposure to environmental and health hazards, denial of advancement opportunities, and the threat of employer retaliation for those who speak out.

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4 Immigration

What to Watch For :

- Trump has pledged to use the 1798 Alien Enemies Act to launch **“the largest mass deportation”** in US history, explicitly targeting documented and undocumented immigrants from Latin American, Caribbean, African, and Asian nations.
- Harris plans to revisit last year’s failed **bipartisan border security bill**, which would increase Border Patrol funding, further expand detention facilities, add new administrative barriers for asylum seekers, and extend existing walls on the southern border.
- In **Arizona, Prop 314** is on the ballot, which would further criminalize immigrants by empowering local law enforcement to question, arrest, detain, and prosecute anyone suspected of crossing the border between legal points of entry.

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Climate Justice

Environmental racism and climate injustice mean that when **we don't invest in climate and environmental resilience, people of color suffer the most.**

Because of structural racism, Black, Latine, indigenous and other people of color have **greater risks of negative physical and mental health outcomes** from intense heat, cold, hurricanes, wildfires, flooding and other climate-related events. They're also more likely to be displaced and suffer significant economic setbacks after such disasters.

On a daily basis, they face **greater exposure to environmental hazards** including air and water pollution, increasing their risks of asthma, cancer, and other diseases.

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5 Climate Justice

What to Watch For :

- 48 states plus DC and Puerto Rico have already created **climate action plans** under a federal program that requires at least 40% of funding to go to under-resourced communities. Final receipt of these funds, ability to execute, and judicious allocation of resources to vulnerable communities could be jeopardized by incoming federal and state administrations.
- **Five states have ballot initiatives** that could increase funding for climate resilience work (CA, LA, MN, RI, SD).
- Many more have **state-level races** that could determine future direction of climate policy.
- City-level races will affect relevant **local zoning and planning initiatives**.

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Educational Access & Equity

Schools are key sites in the struggle for racial justice: access to affordable, quality education reduces health, wealth, and income disparities. **But current shifts in educational policy threaten to increase race and class inequality.**

BIPOC students are often concentrated in K - 12 schools with fewer resources. 'School choice' policies exacerbate this by shifting funds to private schools instead of reinvesting in public education. Meanwhile, **18 states have restricted teaching or learning about racism, sexism, and other forms of systemic inequality** in public schools.

The SCOTUS ban on race-conscious college admissions has reduced Black and brown student enrollment, even as state governments and schools eliminate the diversity, equity & inclusion programs that support the retention & graduation of marginalized students. Meanwhile, new restrictions on political expression mean that college students—especially students of color—are experiencing levels of surveillance, criminalization, and censorship unparalleled since the end of COINTELPRO.

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6 Educational Access & Equity

What to Watch For :

- There are **school choice initiatives** on the ballot in CO, NE & KY. Together, they would set aside tens of millions of dollars in state funding to vouchers and scholarships for private schools, instead of reinvesting in public education.
- Donald Trump's "parents' rights" education platform includes further restricting teaching on race, gender, and sexuality, drastically cutting public school infrastructure, and establishing "**a credentialing body that would certify teachers who embrace patriotic values.**"
- **Statewide superintendents' elections** in MT, NC, ND, and WA will help to determine the future of public education funding and inclusive education in these four states,

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What You Can Do :

Vote the whole ballot. There are ~ 520,000 elected offices and ~150 ballot measures to vote on this election. Most of these are based in states, counties, and cities, and will directly impact the lives of marginalized and vulnerable people right in your community.

Get informed. Seek out voting guides from trustworthy, informed organizations that are committed to intersectional racial justice.

Know your rights. Check out voting rights guides to learn what to do if you or someone you know is challenged, intimidated, or impeded when trying to vote.

Help make voting more equitable & accessible:

- Volunteer as a poll watcher
- Drive/walk/bike others to the polls
- Learn & teach about same-day voter registration
- Offer child or eldercare for caregivers who haven't voted yet.
- Volunteer to assist non-native English speakers in counties without multilingual election materials.

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Tools & References

How To:

[Check if you're registered to vote](#)

[Use same-day voter registration](#)

[Find your polling place](#)

[Know your voting rights](#)

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