

DEMOCRACY WATCH 2025

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humanrightsfirst.org



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Our Rights, Our Freedoms

Human Rights First Works To Create A Just World In Which Every Person's Intrinsic Human And Civil Rights Are Respected And Protected.

Our country is facing a grave threat as those in power leverage bias and disinformation to push rights-restricting legislation through at the state and federal levels. Our communities, schools, libraries, elections, and individual freedoms are being placed at risk by escalating assaults on our rights. In response, Human Rights First launched Democracy Watch in 2025, to track and expose legislative trends that endanger our civil and human rights and undermine democratic processes and institutions. Since its launch, we have tracked a proliferation of authoritarian tactics targeting our states and hurting our communities. This year we saw a wide range of legislative strategies, including rollbacks on reproductive freedom, immigrant and refugee rights, free speech, LGBTQ+ equality, voting rights, and public education.

As the Trump administration continued to grow its inhumane mass deportation campaign, federal and state bills reflected that effort. This year we tracked legislation focused on funding the mass deportation effort, pushing restrictive asylum rules, and removing public benefits. At the federal level, the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” added \$45 billion to Immigration and Customs Enforcement funding, skyrocketing their budget to **\$85 billion**, making them the highest-funded U.S. law enforcement agency. These funds have been used to rapidly expand enforcement and operationalize more detention centers across the country. Other anti-immigrant legislation focused on expedited removals, stricter asylum rules, and restricted public benefits while state actions expanded local enforcement agreements, surveillance programs, and data collection.

The right to protest remained central to the legislative strategies. We tracked **220+ bills** that would restrict First Amendment rights in some form, with **85+ bills** focused on protest rights. Restricting the right to assemble and protest is a hallmark of authoritarian rule and the United States continues to face legislative attacks on these constitutionally protected rights. State bills were introduced that would expand the definition of riot to include nonprofits and peaceful protestors; laws were passed that hampered First Amendment rights on campuses; bills were introduced that would eliminate harsh penalties for drivers who hit protestors with cars.

We traced the ongoing assault on gender, sexuality, and reproductive rights with **1,300+ bills**, the majority of which focused on LGBTQ+ rights. LGBTQ+ rights remained a source of legislative energy with **840+ bills** introduced in states across the country. Attacks on civil rights continued under laws banning diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools, agencies, and private entities. Public education remained a battleground for cross-cutting issues including student protests, gender rights, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. We found **230+ state bills** and **16 federal bills** that would restrict civil rights through anti-DEI(A) measures in public education. Likewise, legislation was introduced and passed that would create dangerous and unjust hurdles for attaining gender-affirming and reproductive healthcare.

This year we saw an increase in attacks on free and fair elections, tracking **480+** bills threatening elections at the state level, and **12+** at the federal level, a steep increase from 170 bills we tracked in 2024. Stemming from a failed attempt to pass the SAVE Act, states took up the effort with **100+** similar proof of citizenship and voter purge bills introduced. Other trends on elections and voting rights included banning ranked choice voting, increasing restrictions for mail-in ballots and creating unjust exclusions for registration and voter ID requirements.

The United States is facing a uniquely challenging era as our rights and freedoms are being assaulted and our democratic institutions dismantled. Shining a light on these trends provides a critical tool in the shared effort to stem this dangerous tide. Democracy Watch acts as a hub for engagement on these legislative trends and allows advocates, activists, researchers, and other concerned citizens to work towards a more resilient democracy for all.



Methodology

Legislative attacks on fundamental rights and democratic norms at both the federal and state levels often follow social and cultural trends. Moreover, the predominant trends that play out in federal legislative strategies trickle down to local levels, making it possible for harmful legislation that cannot make it past difficult thresholds in Congress to become law in the states. In the past year, we have tracked anti-democratic and rights-restricting legislation across a broad swath of categories including gender and reproductive care, education, voting rights and access, immigrant and refugee rights, diversity, equity and inclusion, and protest rights.

How we track anti-democratic and rights-restricting legislation: All the data used in our tracker is initially gathered using AI with human-informed key search terms, then independently analyzed and processed by Human Rights First's experts. We regularly update the tracker with the latest developments for collected legislation and for new legislation.

How we define anti-democratic and rights-restricting: Anti-democratic and rights-restricting are umbrella terms for policies, entities, and actors that contribute to the erosion of hard-won civil rights and progress toward equality, and democratic processes—such as elections and equal access to voting—in favor of government and social structures that maintain power for a specific leader or elite class.

How we decide which categories to focus on: Our categories and subcategories are determined by Human Rights First's internal expertise and current scope.

Advocating For A Better Tomorrow



180+

Federal bills tracked in 2025

6 categories & 10 subcategories

2,500+

State bills tracked in 2025

178%

increase in tracked bills from 2024



First Amendment Rights

This year exposed historic assaults on our constitutional rights. First Amendment rights including free press and the right to protest featured prominently in legislative, policy, and legal attacks. Journalists were detained and arrested while covering protests and public meetings. Public broadcasters were massively defunded while others experienced ideological coups to force alignment with administration politics. The AP remained banned from the White House, while the Pentagon attempted to issue content rules for press, resulting in a mass exodus. The assault on free speech and universities continued with mass defunding schemes and student arrests. And legislation flooded congressional halls, with a myriad of restrictive bills to silence our voices.

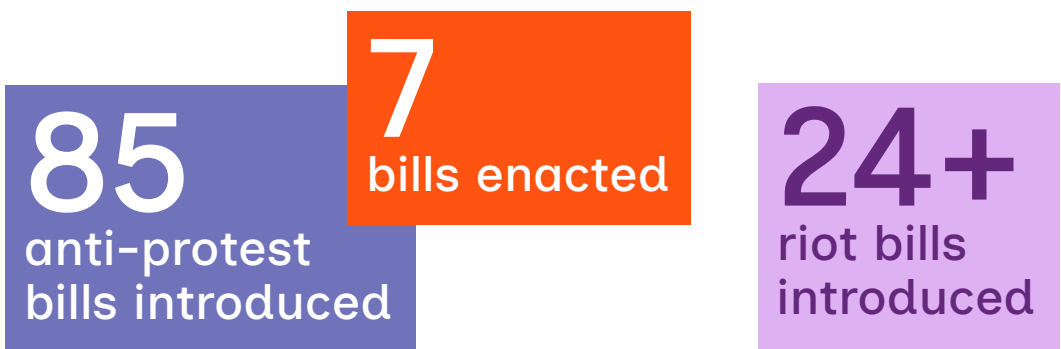
In 2025 we tracked **220+ bills** that would restrict First Amendment rights in some form. Lawmakers across the country introduced bills seeking to restrict organizations including nonprofit organizations from partaking in political speech. Other bills banned entities from respecting gender identity. States attempted to pass laws that would infringe on religious freedoms by privileging Christian nationalism in public institutions. However, the largest trend remained focused on restricting the right to assemble and protest. From the women's suffrage movement, the 1963 Voting Rights Act, LGBTQ+ protest movements, labor movements, to anti-war activism, the right to protest has long been both contested by political actors while remaining central to the democratic tradition of the United States. Protestors have long faced violence from law enforcement, surveillance, arrest and prosecution. Oppressive tactics are not new, and yet we are in a uniquely dangerous era for First Amendment rights as dozens of anti-protest laws are introduced across the country.



Everything's A Riot

Since President Trump's first term, the United States has faced a wave of anti-protest bills introduced by federal and state lawmakers. These bills, often positioned as necessary to prevent disorder and violence, instead introduce chaos in our communities and increase violence against demonstrators. Laws already exist prohibiting violence and property destruction. Rather than strengthening those laws, like lawmakers claim, these bills undermine our constitutional rights and democratic processes.

Compared with previous legislative cycles, the volume of protest-related legislation remains elevated this year with 85 state bills and 25 federal bills introduced in 2025, a marked increase from prior years. Many of the proposals introduced in recent years emerged in response to large-scale demonstrations that drew national attention and prompted a swath of restrictive bill proposals.



A significant portion of bills proposed new restrictions on protest activity, often by expanding criminal penalties for conduct labeled as disruptive to the public, such as blocking roadways or damaging property. We saw a renewed push for anti-mask laws for protestors, as well as bills that if passed would severely limit protest activity on campuses or near private property.

We tracked legislation that would increase the liability of organizers and third parties connected to protest activity. These proposals attempt to define when organizers may be held responsible for damages or unlawful conduct that occurs during demonstrations, often attempting to expand the definition of “riot” or include protest-related support into racketeering charges.

Arizona enacted [HB 2880](#) which bars protest encampments on state and university campuses. The new law establishes that “encampments are no longer lawful on campuses and are criminally liable for prosecution for trespass, damage, and “direct or indirect” costs for their removal.

Kentucky passed [HB 399](#) which creates new criminal offenses for peaceful protestors at the state capitol, and includes anyone deemed a conspirator who materially supports them, potentially including organizers and funders.

[SB 15](#) in **Louisiana** amended Louisiana’s existing laws on obstruction of justice and malfeasance in office to include specific provisions targeting individuals and public officials who interfere with federal immigration enforcement activities. While positioned as a law-and-order effort, this works to restrict protests opposing immigration efforts, creating sweeping language that could easily be used to criminalize peaceful protest.

North Dakota signed into law [HB 1226](#), making it unlawful for peaceful protestors to wear masks, creating a Class A misdemeanor, punishable by up to one year in jail and \$3,000, to wear a mask “with the intent to conceal the identity” of the wearer while “congregating in a public place with other individuals wearing a mask, hood, or other device that covers, hides, or conceals any portion of the individual’s face.”

Oklahoma passed [SB 743](#) which criminalizes vaguely-defined actions that can include peaceful protestors near any place where people are engaged in religious worship, or along routes to such places. Under the new law it is a serious misdemeanor to knowingly approach someone and engage in certain expressive activity, including chanting or holding signs, within 100 feet of a worship location, including conduct occurring on public sidewalks.

[SB 30 / HB 55](#) in **Tennessee** was passed, creating new crimes and increasing penalties for existing offenses. Under the expansive new law, it significantly increases the penalties for “civil rights intimidation,” a broadly drafted offense that could be applied to protestors who are perceived to demonstrate with the intent of “intimidating” someone, including extra penalties for approaching or hindering police officers. It allows for protest actions deemed to “coerce” another (defined by law to include threatening to expose someone to “contempt or ridicule”) with the intent to intimidate them, to be a Class D felony punishable by up to 12 years in prison.

[SB 2972](#) in **Texas** is an expansive new law that limits campus protests by banning protest encampments, placing limits on mask usage, and hampering vigils and other demonstrations taking place at night.



Public Education

Education also remained a significant area of legislative activity in 2025, with federal and state lawmakers introducing numerous bills addressing school governance, curriculum standards, and student policies. As in previous years, education policy continued to serve as a focal point for broader cultural and political debates, particularly those involving the role of public institutions, parental authority, and the boundaries of state oversight in educational settings.

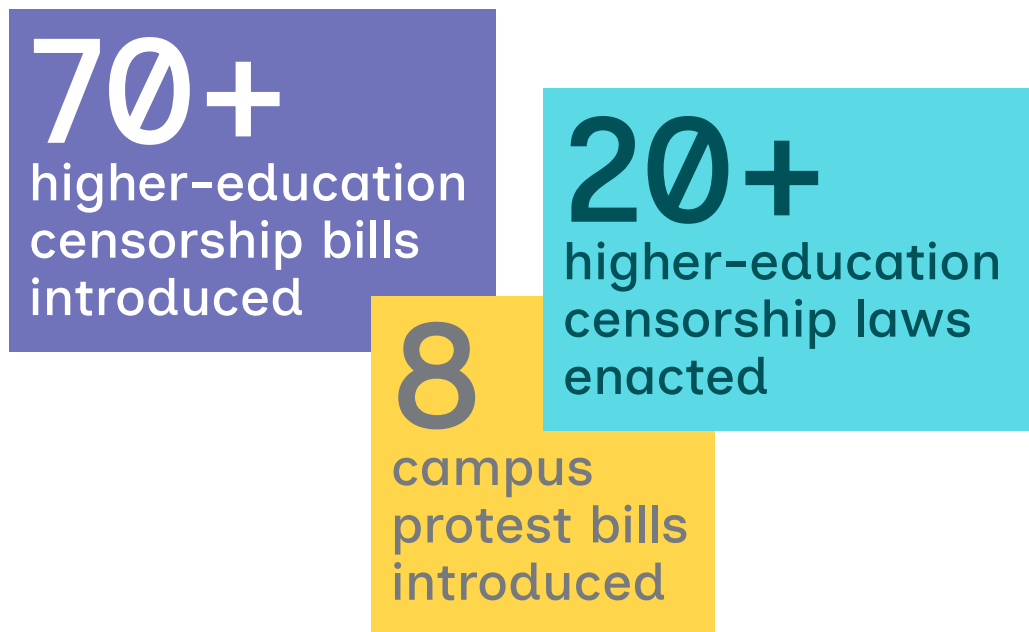
Legislative activity was not distributed evenly across states. Several jurisdictions introduced multiple education-related bills, making them among the most active states in this policy area. A geographic overview of the legislation reveals clusters of activity in states where education policy has been a particularly prominent political issue in recent years, with Texas standing out in this topic with **69** bills introduced.

We tracked a
125%
increase in bills
restricting rights
in public education
compared to 2024
with **620+** state bills
and **25+** federal.

Several major themes emerged in 2025. One significant category involves legislation restricting or restructuring diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in educational institutions. These proposals seek to limit the use of training programs, administrative offices, or instructional materials that support racial and gender justice or work to create more equitable education institutions.

Another major area was the continued restrictions on support for gender identity and gender-affirming practices in schools. Bills were introduced and enacted that restrict participation in activities, access to facilities, and the recognition of gender identity in school records.

Curriculum standards and access to instructional materials also remained central topics in education legislation. Other bills sought to restrict funding for public institutions that allowed campus protest, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, or who rejected the Trump administration's loyalty tests. Several bills address the selection and review of books and other materials used in classrooms and school libraries. These bills sought to wrest control of curricula away from nonpartisan entities or introduce content that pushes Christian nationalist propaganda, often framed ironically as "anti-indoctrination" bills.





Civil Rights In Our Classrooms

In 2025, we tracked **230+ state bills** and **16 federal bills** that would restrict civil rights through anti-DEI(A) measures in public education. These measures included legislation that would prohibit course requirements that promote teaching on racial and gender diversity, systemic racism, racial justice, or reparations; ban mandatory or recommended diversity training; restrict the use of diversity statements in applications, ban colleges from considering race, sex, ethnicity, or nationality in admissions; and prohibit colleges from having diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or staff. Of these bills, 20+ were signed into law.

Arkansas introduced a bill in November 2024 that would ban affirmative action by public colleges and other state and local agencies. **SB 3** was signed into law in February 2025 and took effect in July. In March, **HB 1512** was signed into law, banning diversity statements and collection and reporting mechanisms for DEIA reviews.

In **Indiana**, **SB 289** was signed into law, banning diversity, equity, and inclusion audits, offices and personnel.

Iowa bill **HF 856** took effect, prohibiting public entities (including community colleges) from funding DEI offices or employing DEI officers, and disallows required diversity training or required courses that teach on critical race theory, an extension on the 2024 restrictions placed on public four-year colleges.

In **Kentucky**, **HB 4** went into effect, blocking public colleges from establishing or maintaining DEI offices, officers, training, scholarships, or initiatives.



Mississippi passed [HB 1193](#), banning all DEI programs, diversity training, and diversity statements in schools, as well as banning the teaching of so-called divisive concepts including “transgender ideology, gender-neutral pronouns, heteronormativity, gender theory, sexual privilege, or any related formulation of these concepts.” In July 2025, a [federal judge](#) blocked the enforcement of the law indefinitely, finding that its provisions violated the First and Fourteenth Amendments by prohibiting public school discussions of race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, and other forbidden subjects in all of the state’s public universities, colleges, and K-12 schools.

New Hampshire passed [HB 2](#), which prohibits DEI programs, training, policies, and hiring practices while also stating that if public colleges violate these restrictions legislators can stop the flow of state funding.

In **Ohio**, [SB 1/ HB 6](#) was passed, banning diversity statements, training, offices, and DEI hiring practices, as well as requiring colleges to “affirm and declare” that they provide “intellectual diversity” and “diverse ideological and political views.”

Oklahoma enacted [SB 796](#), banning institutions, including educational, from using state funding for “diversity, equity, and inclusion positions, departments, activities, procedures, or programs.”

Tennessee signed [HB 0377 / SB 0376](#) into law, outlawing using affirmative action and “race, color, ethnicity, or national origin” in university admissions, activities, and financial-aid decisions. A second bill, [HB 622 / SB 1083](#) was enacted in May, which bans state colleges from considering “race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, or disability” in hiring. Finally, [HB 923 / SB 1084](#) prohibits state colleges from maintaining DEI offices.

Texas enacted [SB37](#) giving public universities’ boards of regents significant control over the curriculum, allowing for a five-year curriculum review period and provides a complaint process for anyone to submit compliance grievances.

[SB 474](#) in **West Virginia** was signed into law, banning public colleges from requiring or soliciting diversity statements in hiring or admissions and courses that teach the history of racial and sexual discrimination, as well as prohibiting mandatory diversity training or spending on DEI programs.

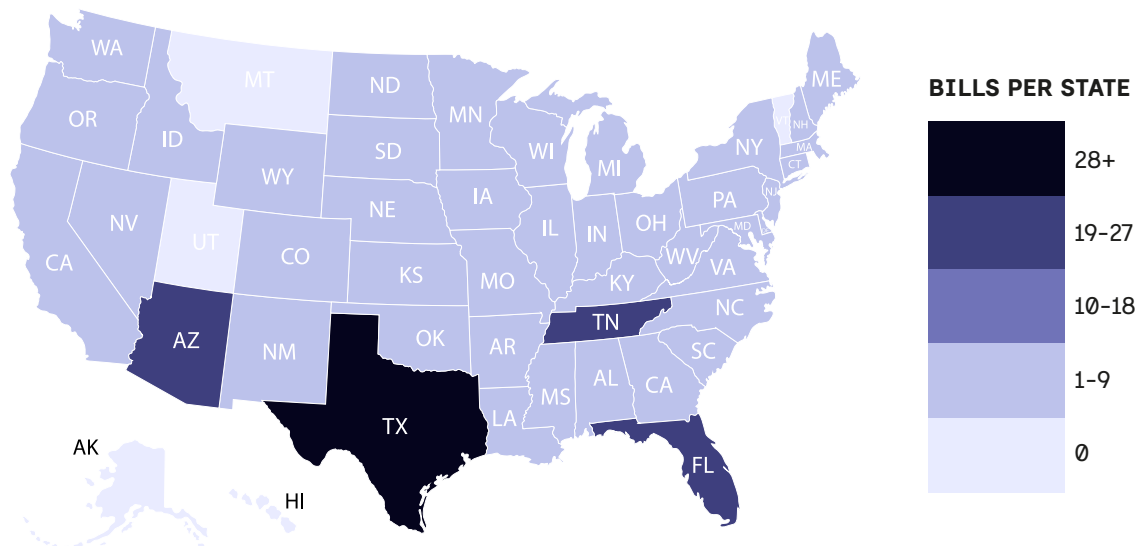
Wyoming passed [HB 0147](#) prohibiting state-government entities, including the University of Wyoming and community colleges, from engaging in any diversity, equity, or inclusion program, activity, or policy.



Immigrant & Refugee Rights

Across the country, lawmakers introduced bills designed to expand enforcement authority, strengthen cooperation with federal immigration agencies, and challenge sanctuary policies adopted by cities and counties. Although immigration law remains primarily a federal responsibility, the past year’s legislative activity illustrates how states are increasingly shaping immigration enforcement.

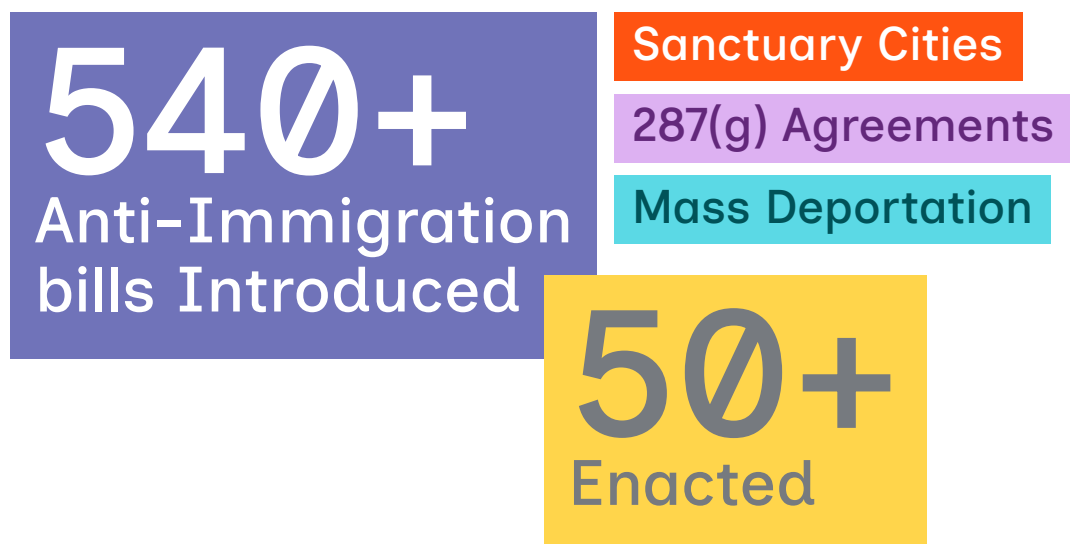
In 2025, state and federal legislatures introduced 540+ immigration-related bills, up from 130+ in 2024, a nearly fourfold increase that underscores how rapidly immigration has expanded this past year. Of those 540+ bills introduced, 50+ were enacted into law, with an over 9% passage rate. The most active states were Texas, with 59 bills introduced, followed by Tennessee with 36, and Florida 24, though immigration-related legislation appeared across a much broader national map. This sharp rise reflects not only an increase in volume, but a broader intensification of efforts to expand enforcement authority, target immigrant communities, and increasingly link immigration narratives to adjacent policy debates over voting and democratic participation.





One of the clearest trends involves efforts to deepen cooperation between local law enforcement and federal immigration authorities, particularly Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), often found in 287(g) agreements, which are voluntary partnerships between U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement agencies, authorized by Section 287(g) of the Immigration and Nationality Act. They delegate limited immigration enforcement powers to local officers to identify and detain noncitizens for deportation. Several proposals require local police departments or sheriffs' offices to share information with federal authorities, comply with immigration detainers, or participate in enforcement partnerships with ICE. Some states have gone further by exploring ways to expand their own role in immigration enforcement. **1,130+** agreements were signed in 2025, many of which were processed via state legislation.

Legislation targeting sanctuary policies has also remained a recurring feature of the state legislative landscape. Sanctuary policies generally limit cooperation between local governments and federal immigration enforcement in order to maintain community trust and protect local autonomy. Bills introduced in 2025 frequently sought to prohibit such policies outright, penalize jurisdictions that adopt them, or require statewide compliance with federal enforcement requests. These proposals reflect an ongoing struggle between state legislatures and local governments over who ultimately determines how immigration enforcement operates within communities.





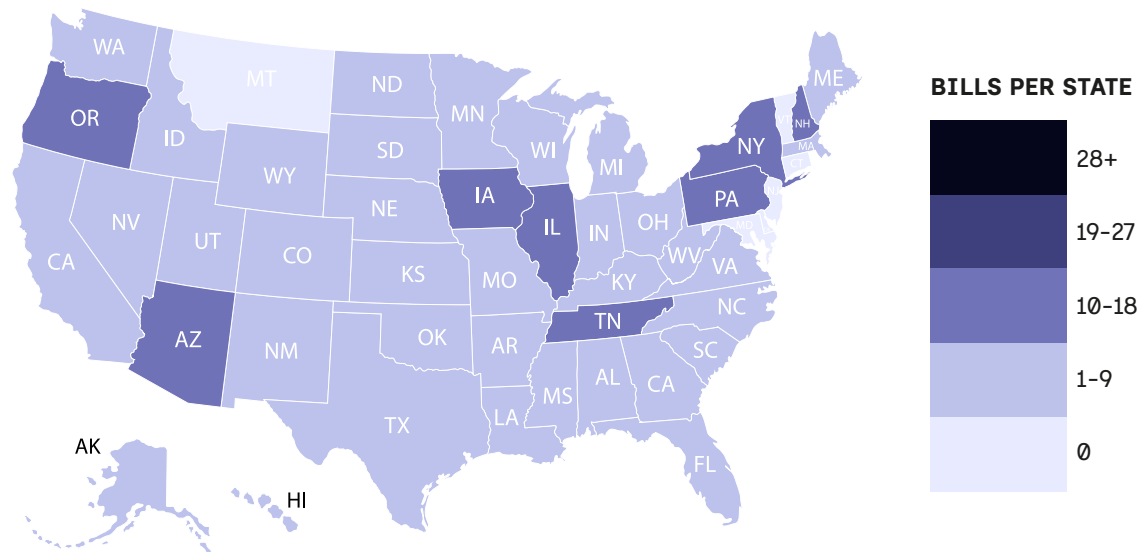
Living In An ICE Age

By the end of 2025 there was a marked shift in immigration policy and enforcement. When President Trump took office, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had around 40,000 people held in their detention centers across the country. By the end of the year this had jumped by over 75% to nearly 73,000 and a 91% increase in detention center usage with 104 new facilities. With the passage of the **One Big Beautiful Bill Act** and the massive budget increase, ICE has funding to expand detention beds to more than 135,000 by the end of FY 2029. Policy shifts in arrest practices have likewise led to a 2,450% increase in people being held with no criminal record. With administration pressure, state lawmakers have increased efforts to pass companion laws.

Elections & Voting Rights

Election policy remained one of the most active and contested areas of state legislation in 2025. Legislatures across the country introduced a wide range of bills affecting how voters register, what identification they must provide, who can participate in primary elections, and how election results are administered and certified. These proposals continue a pattern that has intensified in recent years, in which the rules governing elections have become a central arena for political conflict.

Across the country, lawmakers introduced **480+ bills** threatening elections at the state level, and 12+ at the federal level. Of these, **48+** were signed into law, illustrating how deeply the rules of democratic participation have become embedded in broader political conflict. Legislatures considered a wide range of measures affecting how voters register, what identification or citizenship documentation they must provide, who can participate in primary elections, how absentee and mail voting are administered, and how election results are recounted, certified, or otherwise managed. Texas led the country with **46+** restrictive bills introduced, followed by Arizona introducing **23+**, and New York with **22+** introduced bills. The breadth of this activity suggests that election law is no longer confined to debates over ballot access alone. In 2025, it increasingly extended into struggles over administrative control, voter eligibility verification, and the institutional mechanics of election governance itself.



Efforts to tighten voter identification requirements continued to feature prominently in state legislative agendas. Several proposals expanded existing ID requirements with **100+ bills** that introduced additional verification steps for voters including proof of citizenship. Elements of the sweeping federal bills can be found in many state laws enacted in 2025. At least **7 states** have passed laws restricting mail-in voting and mail-in registration, part of a long-term trend that took hold after the 2020 election. Supporters argue that such measures protect election integrity and reinforce public confidence in election outcomes, yet countless studies of voter registration and election participation data have illustrated time and time again that incidents of voter fraud are exceedingly rare.

Changes to primary election participation rules have also gained attention in several states. Some legislatures considered proposals requiring voters to formally declare party affiliation in order to participate in primary contests. Supporters argue that such measures protect the integrity of party nomination processes by preventing strategic crossover voting, but would likely reduce participation by complicating voter access to primaries.

Finally, several states considered legislation affecting electoral systems themselves. Debates over ranked choice voting and redistricting practices reflect broader disagreements about how elections should translate votes into representation. In some states, lawmakers have moved to restrict or prohibit ranked choice voting, while in others the focus has been on reshaping redistricting procedures that determine how electoral boundaries are drawn.



SAVE Act In The States

Citizenship verification - Documentary Proof of Citizenship (DPOC) - has become an increasingly prominent focus of election legislation. Many proposals draw on the broader national debate surrounding the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act, commonly known as the SAVE Act. At the state level, similar measures seek to require documentary proof of citizenship during voter registration or add new verification procedures to election administration systems. Although noncitizen voting in federal elections is already prohibited under existing law, these proposals reflect the spread of disinformation around voter fraud. The breadth of election-related legislation highlighted a broad movement to restrain voter access and the election process, threatening the access of millions of eligible voters to a core democratic right.

100+
proof of
citizenship bills



Gender, Sexuality, & Reproductive Rights

LGBTQ+, gender, and reproductive rights continued to be at the forefront of nationwide attacks on civil rights and protections. Across the country, lawmakers introduced bills intended to deprive trans youth of healthcare, to ban student athletes from participating in scholastically sponsored sports, and to ban trans people from accessing locker rooms and bathrooms in public locations that reflect their gender identity. Protections based on gender and gender identity were also under attack, with states passing laws that banned the use of the term “gender” and mandated reductive definitions based on “biological sex” to be used instead. Other bills would prevent educators from using students’ preferred first names, a clear violation of First Amendment rights. In 2025 we tracked **1,300+** bills that restrict gender, sexuality, and reproductive rights, the majority of which focused on LGBTQ+ rights.

While transphobic rhetoric is not the centerpiece of anti-democratic rhetoric to the extent that it was even a year ago—being eclipsed by today’s contentious political fights over immigration and foreign policy—this creates the ideal opportunity for state legislatures to pass more severe and restrictive bills while the attention of advocates and the public is taken by other pressing social and political issues. This trend proved true in 2025, with more efforts to deprive trans youth especially of basic rights from self-expression to equal participation in educational institutions proliferating across the country. Legislation targeting trans youth in particular is often irrevocably tied with education policy. For instance, one of the largest trends nationwide were laws that ban trans students’ participation in sports and “locker room ban” and “bathroom ban” bills. Like laws that prevent educators from using students’ preferred names, these laws intentionally target public educational institutions to undermine the rights of LGBTQ+ youth and promulgate the erasure of trans identities.

860+
Introduced

100+
Enacted



The Battle For Reproductive Healthcare

2025 marked three years since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. While many states had “trigger” laws which immediately banned or effectively banned abortion following the ruling, states are continuing to utilize the lack of federal protections for reproductive care to pass even stricter regulations. Many of these laws restrict and even criminalize the distribution of medications used for abortions, while others levy criminal penalties on clinicians and others who perform or help people to access reproductive care, especially if doing so requires traveling from a state with an abortion ban to one without. These laws are direct attacks on the bodily autonomy and civil rights of pregnant persons, and they also undermine the safety and efficacy of healthcare procedures and providers. Provisions introduced would curtail sexual and reproductive rights or restrict access to sexual and reproductive health care, restrict access to abortion care, restrict access to contraceptive services, or ban gender-affirming care for young people.

490+
State bills
introduced

30+
Federal bills
introduced

“We are facing an extraordinary time in the history of our nation, as our rights and freedoms are being threatened by rising authoritarianism. We must, in turn, be extraordinary in our determination to reject these attacks and work together for a better, more secure future.”

Hannah Stiverson
Director of Democracy In Action

About Human Rights First: Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization founded in 1978 to address the lack of legal protection for refugees and asylum seekers. We work alongside Human Rights Defenders, hold human rights abusers accountable, fight for the conditions that uphold democracy, and provide tools that bring the power of AI and advanced technologies to justice and human rights movements.

Human Rights First is based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

Explore what is happening in your state at democracywatchtracker.org

For media inquiries, please contact our press team at press@humanrightsfirst.org

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