South Dakota

State Rank: 37
Overall Score: LOW

Index 1: Voter Registration - Confidence level - LOW
South Dakota closes voter registration 15 days before Election Day. The state does not allow automated, same-day, nor online voter registration. South Dakota purges voters from lists after four years of nonvoting, after no response to state notice of pending removal. There was a low number of purges conducted in 2020. Felony disenfranchisement continues until terms of parole or probation are complete. South Dakota scored among the bottom five states in this index. However, recent state law now allows use of identification other than a driver's license for voter registration, easing the process of voting for many Native Americans who use tribal ID cards, and keeping voter registration records of domestic violence victims confidential.

Index 2: Voter Identification - Confidence level - LOW
South Dakota has a non-strict photo ID law. The state is NOT a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) which helps states improve accuracy of voter rolls. A moderate number of voters contacted the 1-866-OUR-VOTE legal hotline in 2020 during the last week of the election with concerns about voter ID or not being on the voting list/database. No laws were enacted in 2021 to impose restrictions,

Index 3: Early Voting - Confidence level - MEDIUM
South Dakota offers early in-person voting 45 days before Election Day, ending the day before. There is no weekend voting. No-excuse required absentee voting is available.

Index 4: Safe Voting - Confidence level - LOW
South Dakota offers no-excuse absentee ballot voting. Applications are mailed to voters by request only. There is no prepaid postage, restrictive ballot drop-off options, and limited assistance in returning a ballot for a voter in need.
Index 5: Ballot Acceptance - Confidence level - LOW
South Dakota had a high percentage of mail-in ballots returned in 2020, with a low rejection rate. There is a statewide ballot tracking program, but it is not strong nor statutorily required. The state does not allow election administrators to preprocess returned ballots and has no codified process for voters to correct for ballot discrepancies. There is a signature verification program. An application for an absentee ballot must be accompanied by either an oath verifying the information, administered by a notary public or authorized officer, or a copy of the voter’s ID. Ballots must be received by the close of polls on Election Day.

Index 6: Logistical Barriers in Voting - Confidence level - MEDIUM
South Dakota allows employees to take up to 2 hours paid leave to vote. The state has very few measures to assist voters with disability or mobility issues, but does offer high quality accessible voting machines options. Although South Dakota ranked low among other states in its ratio of poll workers to polling sites and rated average in how well it invested in the 2020 elections to improve processes while being cost effective, there were few reports from voters in 2020 with concerns about access and safety issues at the polling sites.

Index 7: Equipment, Security, and Auditing - Confidence level - LOW
South Dakota has a statewide voter-verified paper audit trail, uses hand marked paper ballots, offers Ballot Marking Devices for voters with accessibility needs, and tests the equipment according to federal accreditation. The state’s election security systems received fair overall ratings in 2018. There are no audits conducted during any part of the election process to double-check for machine recording errors.
Although South Dakota has established the constitutional right to a secret ballot, it does not prohibit election interference by the legislature. No laws were passed in 2021 on this topic, but legislation pending in early 2022 sought to shift election authority. State law passed in 2022 prohibits state and local government from accepting private grant funding to cover election-related costs.

Public opinion surveys showed that South Dakota voters had not much trust in the 2020 election news coverage. There were very few reports from voters about political intimidation online and disinformation. State law criminalizes voter intimidation and false election speech, prohibits obstructing or hindering voters at polling sites, requires training for all poll workers, authorizes law enforcement to be present only by request or on official business. South Dakota was one of five states to receive a high score in this index.

South Dakota is one of 19 states that has a Republican trifecta, as well as a triplex - the governor, attorney general, and secretary of state are from the same political party. Based on the last two presidential elections, South Dakota is one of the 10 most Republican states, with an average GOP voting margin of 28.0% compared to the national average Democratic voting margin of 3%. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the state’s population grew by 8.9 compared to the national average of 7.4%. South Dakota is among the least racially diverse states in the country. During the past decade, the white population dropped from 84% to 79%. With the U.S. Census results, the state will neither gain nor lose any representatives in Congress.