



# VOTING AS A NEW AMERICAN

WHAT NEW CITIZENS NEED TO KNOW



# Voting as a New American: What New Citizens Need to Know

Congratulations on becoming a United States citizen! Now that you have taken your citizenship oath, you can register to vote and participate in local, state, and national elections. Here is some information that can help you understand more about voting in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

## Table of Contents

<b>Why should I vote?.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>What kind of elections can I vote in as a US citizen?.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Local, State, and National Elections.....	5
Primary, General, Runoff, and Special Elections.....	6
<b>What do I need to do before voting?.....</b>	<b>7</b>
Register to vote.....	7
Prepare to vote.....	8
<b>How do I vote?.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Candidates and ballot measures.....	9
Paper ballots.....	9
Voting machines.....	10
Support at the voting booth.....	10
Voting in different languages.....	10
<b>When can I vote?.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Presidential/General and Midterm Election Dates.....	10
Election-Day voting.....	11
Early voting.....	11

---

<sup>1</sup> This document provides answers and information that new US citizens may find helpful as they become voters. The information below is meant as a general guide that NAC sites can customize with links and resources specific to each state or county. The NAC does not and will not support any specific candidate or any political party in any election. We are grateful to the International Rescue Committee team in Atlanta for allowing us to use materials they developed. Special thanks go to the Houston Endowment for supporting the development of this guide. Please contact [nac@ilrc.org](mailto:nac@ilrc.org) with any questions.

**Where can I vote?.....12**  
    In-person voting.....12  
    "Absentee" or "mail-in" voting..... 13

**Who can I vote for in the next election?..... 13**

**What is the full process for electing a new U.S. President?..... 13**

**Can you tell me who to vote for?.....15**

**Who will know who I voted for?..... 15**

**What if I change my mind after I submit my ballot?..... 15**

**Do I have to vote?..... 16**

**What if someone tells me that I'm not allowed to vote?..... 16**

**What happens after I vote?.....16**

**What are poll workers?.....17**

**What is a polling precinct?.....17**

**Who makes the rules about voting?.....17**

**Where can I get help with voting?..... 17**

**What are my rights as a voter?..... 18**

## Why should I vote?

Voting is a personal decision that only you can make for yourself. However, there are several reasons you may want to vote.

- **It's your right.** Voting is your constitutional right as an American citizen.
- **It's how you elect people who have your best interest in mind.**
  - Voting is how we choose local, state, and national (or federal) representatives who make decisions on issues like education, health care, jobs, immigration policy, infrastructure, and the economy.
  - Elected officials decide how to use the taxes you pay. By voting, you play an active role in deciding how your hard-earned taxpayer money is used.
  - Voting is more than choosing a president or senators and congressional representatives. Many local positions are also decided during elections, which can significantly impact your community.
- **It's how you make your unique voice heard.** Voting is a powerful way for immigrant communities to make their unique perspectives heard on the local, state, and national levels. Historically, some racial minorities in the United States have been underrepresented or had their voting rights suppressed, so it is especially impactful for them to claim their rights and use their voices.
- **It's a key way to participate in our democracy.** New Americans come from every country and have diverse political opinions and policy priorities. When more people from all backgrounds can vote, our democracy is more representative.

## What kind of elections can I vote in as a US citizen?

There are many different kinds of elections in the United States, and you can vote in all of them if you are a US citizen, you register on time, and you follow your local guidelines about voting.

### Local, State, and National Elections

**Local.** Some elections are to choose local leaders, such as the mayor of your town, the members of your district's school board, or members of the city council.


**State.** Other elections decide who will lead your state in positions like governor, member of the state legislature, and the state attorney general.

**National.** You can also participate in elections to elect the people who represent your state in the US Senate and the US House of Representatives. Finally, there are national elections for the president and vice president.


## Primary, General, Runoff, and Special Elections

There are a few types of elections:


- **Primary:** In a primary election, you vote for one candidate from a list of several candidates from the same political party. The winner of the primary election goes up against the winner of the primary from the opposing political party in the general election. These elections typically take place in the spring.

 **TIP:** You can think of primaries like the semi-finals of a soccer tournament.

- **General:** These are what you might already think of as elections. Often, general elections decide important offices such as the Presidency, Senate, Congress, and local positions. These are the elections that occur in November. You can vote in a general election even if you do not vote in a primary election.

 **TIP:** General elections are like the finals match of a soccer tournament – but everyone gets to choose who they think should win.

- **Runoff:** These elections occur when neither candidate receives enough votes to win the election. You can vote in a runoff election whether or not you voted in the election that forced the runoff.

 **TIP:** Runoff elections are like a tie in a soccer tournament that now has to be settled by penalty kicks. However, in an election, instead of penalty kicks, there is another election between the two candidates.

- **Special:** Special elections occur when an elected official leaves office unexpectedly due to death, illness, resignation, or any other reason that does not allow them to finish their term. These can happen any time of year.

## What do I need to do before voting?

[\(View, edit, and download graphic series on how to vote\)](#)

### Register to vote

The first step to becoming a voter is to register to vote. Registering to vote means confirming with your state's election administrator that you are eligible to vote because you are over 18-years-old and a U.S. citizen. Some states will ask you for a government-issued ID like a driver's license to register. You must also be a resident of the county where you submit your voter registration. In some states there are additional voter registration requirements; you can learn more about eligibility in your state at this website: <https://vote.gov/>.

Your voter registration status is public, as is your party affiliation or registration (e.g., whether you are registered as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or no party affiliation). Public records are

also kept of everyone who voted in each election. However, **there is no record of *who you vote for* or *how you vote on any ballot item in any election*.**

If you registered to vote in the past but it has been a long time since you voted, you may need to renew your registration. You can check your voter registration status at this website:

<https://www.ballotready.org>.

Voting rights for people who have been convicted of a crime vary from state to state. If you have questions, you can check your state's voting registration rules for people with convictions here: [https://ballotpedia.org/Voting\\_rights\\_for\\_people\\_convicted\\_of\\_a\\_felony](https://ballotpedia.org/Voting_rights_for_people_convicted_of_a_felony). You should also confirm eligibility with your state's election administrator.



**TIP:** You can find out more about your local election offices and the people who run the elections in your area at this website: <https://www.usvotefoundation.org/election-offices>

## Prepare to vote

Reading about the issues and candidates that will be voted on in an election can be helpful. It is also very helpful to [review a sample ballot](#) so you can see how it is laid out and where each item you can vote on is. You can find a guide to the items on the ballot you will use at this website: <https://www.ballotready.org>.

You can also talk about the issues and candidates in an upcoming election with your friends, family, or community. You do not have to tell anyone who or what you are voting for if you do not want to.

You may want to prepare a list of how you want to vote. You can bring this list or a sample ballot to the polls to help remind you. However, some states do not allow cell phones in voting booths, so be sure that your list is on paper.

## How do I vote?

If you have never voted before or never voted in the United States, it can feel overwhelming to get started. Remember, you can choose any candidate and vote for any ballot issue however you want.

## Candidates and ballot measures

The first thing to know is that you can vote on two types of things: people (candidates) and issues (ballot measures or propositions).

**Candidates** want to become elected officials at the local, state, or national levels. Sometimes, there are many candidates from the same political party (as in a primary election), and sometimes there is only one representative from a political party (as in the general election).

In most elections, you can only choose one candidate for each position. You can vote for people from the same political party for all the open offices or choose candidates from a combination of different political parties. The most important thing is that you believe that the candidates you vote for are going to represent and advocate for you, your family, and your community.


**Ballot measures** or **propositions** are proposals for local or state policies. These usually have two options for your vote: yes or no. State and local ballot measures and propositions may affect your life directly, so it is essential to review them before the election.

## Paper ballots

One way to vote is with a pen and a piece of paper called a **ballot**. The ballot has a list of the candidates and ballot measures or propositions. Following the directions on the ballot or provided by the election workers, you can select the candidates you wish to vote for. You can also indicate if you are “for” (yes) or “against” (no) the ballot measures or propositions.

You can see a sample ballot for each election in your area at this website:

<https://www.ballotready.org>.

 **TIP:** Even if you do not vote for every item on the ballot, the votes you do cast will be counted.

## Voting machines

Another way that some areas vote is with **voting machines**. These special computers have all the candidates and ballot measures or propositions on them. Following the directions of the poll workers, you press the screen or button to select the candidates you wish to vote for and your vote on each of the ballot measures or propositions (typically yes or no).

## Support at the voting booth

During elections, poll **workers** are available to help. Poll workers cannot and should not tell you who or what to vote for, but they will check you in to vote, show you the technique for filling out the ballot, and connect you with translators or interpreters at the polling station if necessary.

You can also take a relative or companion into the voting booth to assist you if you have difficulty understanding English and/or [if you have a disability](#).

## Voting in different languages

Many new citizens feel more comfortable reading, writing, or speaking in their own language. This matters for voting because it is important that US citizens can participate in elections, even if they don't speak or read English.

Here are some of the ways that voters with limited English can exercise their voting rights:

- In every state and county, voters can bring a companion to translate ballots or help communicate with poll workers. This companion cannot be an employer or union representative but may be anyone else.
- In some counties with large immigrant communities, polling places must provide bilingual assistance and translated voting materials. You can see a list of counties that offer bilingual election support in Asian languages [here](#) and a list of every county that is required to provide language assistance [here](#). (Note that when “Hispanic” appears in the right-hand column, that means that the county must provide election materials in Spanish.)

## When can I vote?

### Presidential/General and Midterm Election Dates

Presidential elections happen in years divisible by 4, like 2020, 2024, 2028, etc. During this election cycle, you may also be able to vote for members of Congress, state and local representatives, and state and local ballot issues or propositions.

“Midterm” elections happen half-way through a presidential term; that is, only even years every two years. During midterm elections, voters vote for members of Congress, state and local representatives, and state and local ballot issues or propositions.

Presidential elections and midterm elections are held on the first Tuesday in November. Primary elections, other local elections, and some unusual or “special” elections may be held on different days in different months. It is important to register to vote and/or check your voter registration status in advance of election cycles.

### Upcoming national elections:

Presidential and General Elections	Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2024
Midterm Elections	Tuesday, Nov. 3, 2026
Presidential and General Elections	Tuesday, Nov. 7, 2028
Midterm Elections	Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2030



## Election-Day voting

**Election-Day voting** is when you, and many other voters from your area, go to a polling place to vote on Election Day. When you arrive at your assigned polling place, poll workers check you in and either give you a ballot or direct you to a voting machine. In some areas, there can be long lines to enter polling places on Election Day.

## Early voting

**Early voting** is when a state allows people to start voting before Election Day. Check with your local registrar of voters to learn more about early voting in your area.

## Where can I vote?

Cities and towns in the United States are divided up into different voting districts known as **polling precincts**. Each polling precinct has a specific place where people go to vote on Election Day. However, there are multiple ways to vote in elections. This website has a list of the ways you can vote in your state: <https://www.usvotefoundation.org/state-voting-methods-and-options>.

## In-person voting

Filling out your ballot at an official polling place is called "in-person voting". When you vote in-person, you are given a ballot or directed to a machine. Then, you can make your choices on candidates and issues. If you don't know where your local polling place is, you can [click here to find out](#).

Some states require voters to show government-issued identification (an "ID") before they are allowed into the voting area. You can use this website to learn more about states' ID requirements for voters: <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id>.

## "Absentee" or "mail-in" voting

Some states allow voters to **fill out a ballot at home** before Election Day and either drop it off or mail it in. There may be rules about who can vote this way; in some states, you must confirm that you cannot physically make it to a polling place, while in others, anyone who wants to vote by mail can do so if they request a mail-in or absentee ballot. There are many reasons why someone may want to vote by mail. Physical disability, a busy schedule, or travel on election day are examples.

## Who can I vote for in the next election?

You can vote for **anyone you want**.

- In a primary election you can vote for anyone that appears on the ballot for the primary you registered for, but you can only vote in one primary.

- In a general election, you can vote for any candidate that appears on the ballot or voting machine.
- In many elections you can write in the name of a person who is not an official candidate or who does not appear on the ballot. However, some states will not count write-in votes unless the write-in candidate has filed required election paperwork. You can learn more about voting for write-in candidates at this website:  
<https://www.usa.gov/write-in-candidates>.

## What is the full process for electing a new US President?

Electing a president has several steps outlined in the US Constitution. Although in most countries, whoever wins the most votes is elected president, in the United States, the president is elected by a group of **electors** who vote in the **electoral college** based on which candidate won the most votes in each state. Whichever candidate achieves 270 electoral college votes becomes president.

**NOTE TO PARTNERS:** The electoral college is a very complicated process, so we have tried to explain it as simply as possible here. A longer, more detailed explanation is also included below. Feel free to delete or skip the longer explanation if appropriate.

### ***More details about the presidential election cycle***

The first step is voting in the primary election in your state. These happen on different days for different states, usually between March and June of a presidential election year. In a primary election, candidates from the same party are on the same ballot. Voters can only vote in one primary, typically the one that is for the party you are registered for.

The candidate that wins the primaries in the largest number of states is then officially **nominated** as that party's official candidate for the general election. This is also when the vice president is also officially nominated. However, the vice-presidential candidates do not appear on the ballot and are not officially voted for. This nomination process happens at each party's **convention**. These are held during the summer months of a presidential election year.

The general election for president is when candidates from all the political parties appear on the same ballot at the same time and voters select a single candidate to vote for. It does not matter which party you voted in for the primaries – in the general election, you can vote for whichever candidate you believe will be the best leader for the United States.

In the days following a general election for president, election workers in each state count the number of votes each presidential candidate received. State election officials then publicly announce the winner and how many **electoral college votes** that candidate receives.

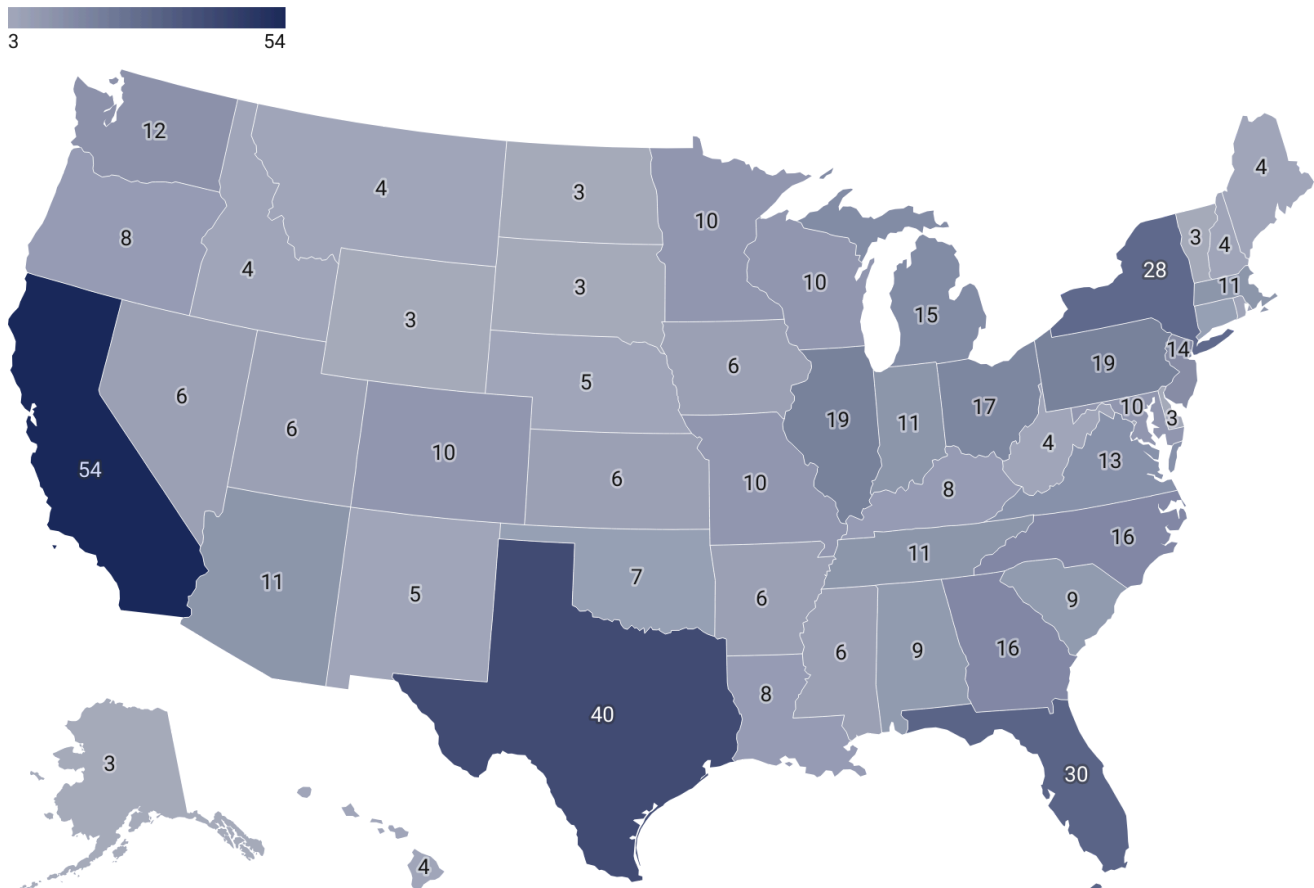
**More details about the Electoral College**

The electoral college is when people known as **electors** gather to hold the final and most definitive election for President of the United States. Each state has the same number of electors as its members of Congress (Senators and members of the House of Representatives). In every state except Maine and Nebraska, whichever candidate wins the most votes in that state during the general election receives all of the electors for that state. For example, Nevada has four members of the House of Representatives and two Senators. That means that whichever presidential candidate receives the most votes in Nevada during the general election receives six electors for the electoral college.

During the electoral college process, electors vote for the candidates based on their state’s general election results. Whichever candidate receives 270 or more votes in the electoral college is officially elected president of the United States.

A candidate can receive the highest number of direct votes in all 50 states and lose the electoral college vote (which is based on votes distributed across state’s electors). In this situation the winner of the electoral college vote becomes president, even though they received fewer direct votes in the general election.

**Electoral votes per state in the 2024 presidential election**



## Can you tell me who to vote for?

No one can force you to vote for someone or dictate how you vote in an election. That is a choice you should make based on what you think is important for your family and community.

However, during campaigns, you will see commercials, posters, or other advertisements encouraging you to vote for a candidate or a certain way on a ballot measure or proposition. These are paid for by candidates or organizations that raise money to do this. These groups and their advertisements are not officially connected with the government, and you do not have to follow their suggestions if you do not wish to do so.

## Who will know who I voted for?

The only people who know who you voted for are the people you decide to tell.

Although poll workers check you in by looking up your name and (in some states) [checking your ID](#), voters' names are never included on a ballot, and there is no way to connect a ballot to a voter.

You may tell anyone who you want to vote for before an election, and you can tell anyone who you voted for after the election. Doing so is never required, and no one has the right to demand to know who or how you voted.

## What if I change my mind after I submit my ballot?

Once you submit your ballot, there is no way to change your choices for candidates or ballot issues.

However, in some states, there is a process known as **ballot curing** that allows voters to correct ballots that are rejected due to a technical error with the actual ballot. This is an important process to make sure that all ballots – and all voters' choices – can be included in the results. You can read more about ballot curing [here](#).

## Do I have to vote?

No. In the United States, **voting is voluntary**. We believe that it is very important to exercise your rights as a U.S. citizen and we encourage you to become an informed voter.

## What if someone tells me that I'm not allowed to vote?

If you are a registered voter and someone outside a polling place tells you that you are not allowed to vote, or if anyone tries to prevent you from entering the polling place, you should report it to the organizations that help protect everyone's right to vote. It is not acceptable for people to discourage voters from going to the polls, and it is not legal to make it feel frightening or unsafe to go into a polling place or voting booth.

If anyone other than an elections official or poll worker tries to frighten you into not voting, or prevent you from voting, you should contact one of these organizations right away. You can also reach out to our team for support.

- English: 866-OUR-VOTE / 866-687-8683
- Español: 888-VE-Y-VOTA / 888-839-8682
- Arabic: 844-YALLA-US / 844-925-5287
- For Bengali, Cantonese, Hindi, Urdu, Korean, Mandarin, Tagalog, or Vietnamese: 888-API-VOTE/ 888-274-8683

## What happens after I vote?

After you vote, your ballot (or your choices on a voting machine) are combined with the ballots and choices made by everyone in your polling precinct. **No one will be able to tell which ballot or which set of choices is yours.**

Poll workers who get special training count the ballots and determine how many votes each candidate and each ballot measure received. They report these totals to the state agency that oversees elections. Elections administrators for your state combine the results from your polling precinct with all the other precincts.

Once all the precincts have finalized their vote counts, the elections administrators for your state combine those totals with the ballots received by mail or from registered voters overseas (e.g., members of the US military who are deployed abroad).

**Usually, whichever candidate receives the most votes wins the election.** Similarly, each ballot measure or proposition is decided based on whether the “yes” or “no” option received the most votes. However, there are some elections where this is not the case. For example, the presidential election is decided based on electoral college votes, not the total number of votes received.

If you watch the news on Election Day, you may see results being reported as “preliminary.” This is because the states' elections administrators go through a formal process after Election Day to certify the results. Once the results of the election are certified, the candidates that received the most votes and the ballot measures that received more “yes” than “no” votes are final.

## What are poll workers?

Poll workers receive training on how to set up and manage polling places and count votes from ballots. Poll workers may also be called election clerks, election judges, election inspectors, or commissioners. Poll workers are an essential part of keeping elections in the US working smoothly. You may want to consider volunteering as a poll worker! It is always helpful to have poll workers who speak many languages and understand the kinds of questions that new Americans voting for the first time might have. To learn more about volunteering as a poll worker, [click here](#).

## What is a polling precinct?

A polling precinct is a district or a group of neighborhoods that go to the same polling place to vote on Election Day.

## Who makes the rules about voting?

Each state has its own rules about voting and voter registration. These rules and all elections are managed by state agencies and elections officials (sometimes called elections administrators).

## Where can I get help with voting?

The most important source of information about and help for voting is your state's election administrator.

## What are my rights as a voter?

You have additional rights as a voter that are important to know.

- If you are in line when polls are supposed to close, you have the right to stay in line until you are able to vote.
- If you make a mistake on your ballot, you can ask for a new one.
- If the voting machines are not working at your polling location, you can ask for a paper ballot.
- If your citizenship, criminal record, or other qualifications are being questioned, call the Election Protection Hotline.
  - English: 866-OUR-VOTE / 866-687-8683
  - Spanish: 888-VE-Y-VOTA / 888-839-8682
  - Arabic: 844-YALLA-US / 844-925-5287
  - For Bengali, Cantonese, Hindi, Urdu, Korean, Mandarin, Tagalog, or Vietnamese: 888-API-VOTE / 888-274-8683
- For more about your rights as a voter, you can visit these websites:
  - <https://www.usa.gov/voting-rights>
  - <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/voting-rights>

- <https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/voting-rights>
- <https://naleo.org/voting-rights/>
- <https://voterhelpdesk.usvotefoundation.org/en/support/home>



**NEW AMERICANS CAMPAIGN**

[www.newamericanscampaign.org](http://www.newamericanscampaign.org) • [@newamericans](https://twitter.com/newamericans)