

Voting in the United States

On the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November on even-numbered years, citizens across the [United States](#) go to the polls to cast their votes. With campaign workers and their signs keeping a respectable distance from the entrance, Americans enter to elect their leaders. While these elections to federal offices tend to garner most of the media's interest, they are only a small step in the process of voting in the United States. There are several other levels of government, some of which may wait for their own election day.

The Elections

The most important aspect of elections in the United States is that there is no such thing as a 'national election'. Although federal law places certain requirements for the election of positions in the federal government, such as the date of the general election, availability to write in the name of a person not listed on the ballot and access to the polling places, the actual rules and conduct of voting are the domain of the states and local governing bodies. It is important to understand that election rules and guidelines are set by the individual states and administered by local governments and thus will vary from place to place.

Federal Offices

The [US Constitution](#) sets the term length for all members of the House of Representatives at two years - therefore there is an election held in every even-numbered year. The president and vice-president serve four-year terms and run in years that are divisible by four - for example 2000, 2004 and so on. Senators serve six-year terms, with one third up for election every two years. The federal law requires that these elections are held on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November.

State Offices

Each state is required to have a 'republican form of government', but the states are given great latitude in the execution of this requirement. All states, at the time of writing, have a governor as head of the state's executive branch. All states except Nebraska have two chambers of their legislature - the State House of Representatives and a State Senate. Nebraska has only a state senate - it is a unicameral legislature. Other state offices may include such positions as Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Secretary of Agriculture, Commissioner of Elections, Commissioner of Education and many others - the titles do vary from state to state. Depending on the individual state, these positions may be either elected or appointed. State elections are often held at the same time as the elections for federal office, although this is by no means a requirement. Some states use the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November as their voting date on odd-numbered years.

County Offices

Each state is further divided into counties¹, these are the most local form of government that applies to every voter in the United States. Most counties elect a County Commission and a School Board, while other elected positions often include a Sheriff, County Clerk, Supervisor of Elections, County Coroner and many other positions - based on either the state constitution, county charter or other relevant law. County elections may be scheduled to coincide with the federal offices or set on a different date at the choice of the county.

City, Town or Village Offices

Many areas are incorporated as a subdivision of a county and have their own government to provide basic services for their citizens. In many places, areas exist that have no city government² and rely on their county for all required services. Many, but by no means all, cities have an elected mayor who acts as the executive for city affairs. The City Council will normally be an elected body who meet to discuss and pass laws and ordinances in order to regulate the citizens of their city. Other elected positions may include a Code Enforcement board, an Historical Review Commission, Police Chief and, in a few communities, the Dog Catcher (Animal Control Officer). City Elections may be held at any time the city chooses, but are normally held at the same time each year.

The Candidates

In the United States, almost anyone can try to run for any office, but there are age and citizenship requirements. Presidential and vice-presidential candidates must be natural-born citizens (ie, they were born in the United States of America or on United States territory (such as an overseas military base) by the time they apply to run. Other offices only require citizenship either by birth or naturalisation. Other qualifications usually apply such as residency in the district the office represents³. Some specialised positions such as judge or coroner may require certain basic education, however, sometimes this is just left to the discretion of the voters. Persons convicted for serious crimes may not vote or run for office unless their civil rights have been restored. For State and Federal office, you must file with the State Elections Office, otherwise you will file with the county supervisor of elections or other designated official. You will usually be required to provide the signatures of a certain number of registered voters and/or pay a filing fee. If all is in order, your name will appear on the ballot.

Political Parties

As important as political parties have become to American politics, they are not really a requirement. As the US government began to function, various groups of like-minded people began to work together for their common good. Knowing who agrees with your ideas makes it much easier to get signatures and raise money. The parties are in some ways like private clubs who can make rules on how to conduct the affairs of their own party, however all money collected and spent is carefully monitored to make sure it is used properly according to law. To prevent undue influence, there is usually a maximum donation that any individual or corporation may make to individual candidates and issues. Both the party and individual candidates may accept donations, but the rules are different on how the money is spent. Often a Political Action Committee will be formed as another way of raising additional money. All campaign advertisements must list the name of the organisation who is paying for it. It is up to each person how much, if anything, they wish to donate to the party.

As well as a national committee, each party will have state and local committees to help guide the process. With very few exceptions these are volunteer positions. Generally no-one is excluded from active party membership if they desire to participate. There have been only two major political parties, the Democrats and Republicans, for well over a hundred years but several so-called 'third parties' do exist and some, such as the [Libertarian](#) party, are gaining support. It is also possible to run as an independent and have no party affiliation. One of the effects of having more than two candidates in a single race is that the leading candidate may have less than 50% of the vote. This also leads to the spoiler effect where the third party or independent candidate will draw the votes from the candidate that is closest to their own views. In short, although the majority of the voters hold a particular political philosophy, the opponent of their views will be elected because they have been split between two candidates while the minority voters remain united. One other point on the subject of parties is that some races, particularly the school board and local councils may be declared 'non-partisan', meaning that the candidates are not allowed to use their party affiliation in the election.

Other Voting Issues

Most state laws are passed by the state legislature and approved by the governor - however, some issues must be voted on by the people for final approval. Some local items may also require a public vote. These are called referendums,⁴ or in some states such as California they are called propositions. In some other places they are a combination of both, or may even be given other designations. Public votes on issues are called a binding referendum and will pass or fail on the outcome of the vote. Occasionally a legislative body will want public opinion on a controversial issue and add a non-binding referendum, which if passed will only serve as a guideline for future legislation on the issue. One of the most powerful forms of the referendum is for issues the legislature does not bring up for a vote. If any citizen or group wishes to place an issue on the ballot as a binding referendum, they usually are required to create a petition and circulate it to acquire signatures - this is similar to the process for candidates described above. If enough valid signatures are obtained and/or the filing fee or other required criteria are met by a specified date, the issue will appear on the ballot in the general election. These are known as 'grass roots movements'.

Voter Registration

In 1971 the voting age was set at 18 years old by the XXVI amendment to the constitution. An individual reaching this age or moving into a new county may register to vote, providing they can show they meet the residency requirements and provided that their civil rights have not been abridged by either conviction of a serious crime or if they have been found mentally incompetent. There is no requirement for anyone to register. It has been a common practice to select jury pools from the voter registration rolls and many have declined to register for that reason, however some districts have switched to pulling names from driving licence records instead. When you register, your address will be recorded, assigning you to a voting precinct. You will also see a list of districts you live in; these can include US Representative, State Senate, State House of Representative, County Commissioner, School Board, Special District⁵, and what, if any, city's elections you may participate in. You may also be asked if you wish to declare yourself a member of a political party. If you choose a party you will be allowed to vote in their primary election⁶. This is not a requirement in all states, however. Once you are registered, you will receive a voter identification card which can be used as proof of citizenship by some local counties⁷ and should be shown, if requested, when you vote.

Voting Precincts

Each polling place is assigned to one or more precincts. The polling place itself may be a room in a school, the recreation hall of a church, in someone's private home (usually the garage) or almost any place public or private that has been made available and complies with the Americans With Disabilities Act, which mandates accessibility to people with handicaps. In some places portable buildings have been used. No matter where they are located, all polling places are staffed by poll workers, have a list of all eligible voters and an area reserved for voters. If the precinct is using any kind of paper ballot there is also a ballot box. No campaigning is allowed within a certain distance from the polling place and this is strictly enforced.

Absentee Ballots

If you will be away from home, unable to attend, or even unwilling to go to your polling place on election day you may request an absentee ballot. If you are a member of the military on active service, or a citizen who resides abroad there are special guidelines for federal elections by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act. The actual requirements - such as deadlines for application and return of ballots, signature validation, if required at all, by witness or notary, and how the ballots are counted - all vary from state to state.

Campaign Season - First Bout

It is quite common for several persons in the same party to decide to run for the same office; to gain the most votes of their supporters in each race, the party will choose the most popular one in a primary election⁸. Primary elections are not required by law, but the selection of candidates for federal office for each party is universally recognised. There is no universal date set for primaries and several states try to increase their own importance by scheduling early primaries or setting several primaries on the same date, reducing the importance of later state's primaries due to the lead of certain candidates. State, county or city elections may or may not use primaries at their own option.

These candidates will start a campaign designed to gain the most votes from the voters who have declared themselves party members. This campaign may include signs posted in yards and tacked to poles, rallies, personal appearances and debates. The ubiquitous television and radio advertisements usually start out with why you should vote for so-and-so in a calm and patriotic setting. As the primary day draws closer we begin to see the most unflattering pictures of the opposition and listing everything in their past that can be cast in a negative light. A campaign that focuses on making your opponent look bad is called 'mud-slinging'. Although the candidates at this stage may well speak out against the other party to show how much better they would be at the office in question, their main targets are the other members of their own party.

The Primary Election

On the day of the primary election each polling place is opened. Inside you will find a registration table and voting area for each party that has candidates standing. In some states you may only vote in the races of the party listed on your voter registration - this is a 'closed primary.' In others, you may pick the party for which you wish to vote, an 'open primary'. Under no circumstances may you vote for more than one party for the same position in a primary. On your ballot⁹ you will find a list of candidates who belong to the party for each office. You may only vote for one person in each race. If, when the results of the primary have been counted, no one has a majority of the votes for an office, a second and possibly even more primary or run-off election may be held between the top candidates depending on the local election rules for that race.

The Presidential Conventions

As the presidential/vice-presidential race is the only one that is a nationwide race, the parties have to have another step to pick their final candidate. In each state's primary, the candidates will have filed, campaigned and run for their office just like everyone else. However, the vote cast for the candidate is actually used to select delegates to the party's national convention. In some states the delegates may all be chosen for the winning person - in others they may be split up according to the actual vote. Some candidates may choose not to run in certain states.

At the convention, the party has the attention of the media and interested voters. They will announce each candidate with rousing speeches and demonstrations. When the time comes to vote, they will call each state where the top delegate will shout out the vote of their state. On the first ballot, each delegate must vote for the person they were elected to represent. After that, votes may be changed and quite often one candidate will trade his delegates to another in a deal for a place in his or her administration. After a candidate is selected as the party's presidential candidate, he will announce who he has chosen to run as his vice-president. This selection will usually be based on who will add the most votes in the general election rather than pure qualification. The presidential and vice presidential candidate are known as 'the ticket'.

Campaign Season - Second Bout

In a manner very similar to that of the primary campaign season, in the run-up to the general election all the campaigners will now focus on the winner of the opposing party or parties. Although the parties limit themselves to a single candidate, there is no limit on how many parties or independent candidates may run. One interesting thing that happens at this time is that the most bitter opponents in the primaries will suddenly come together and support their party in the general election. This is called 'mending fences'. Unless they wish to have no future in their own party, they will never come out and support another party's candidate.

The General Election

Once again it is time to go to your precinct's polling place. This time there is only one table and voting area for each precinct. As you go through your ballot this time, you will find the winners of the primaries as well as those who were the only candidate for their party. Some races may only have one person running for the office - they are unopposed and automatically win if they can get at least a single vote. In addition, the other voting issues are quite often available for you to vote for or against. These may cover such topics as term limits for certain offices, changing tax laws, re-wording a paragraph in the state constitution and could even change the form of local government.

As the polls close and the votes are counted, the television stations will begin to show the results. As the votes tend to come in from isolated areas, initial returns can be very misleading - however, by morning most races have a clear winner. There are also computer sites in many areas that post the results for those with computer access. In races with three or more candidates there may be cases where nobody wins a majority of the votes; if this happens there may be a special election held between the two top finishers, or the one with the most votes may be declared the winner according to the state's election code¹⁰. Although rare, sometimes there will be a tie in a race. How this is decided can and does vary from place to place. Sometimes the local council will vote, in one race the outcome was actually decided by a poker game between the candidates whose votes were tied.

There is a set date after each election when the results can be challenged. This can include requesting a recount of the ballots and inspecting and certifying that all the equipment and procedures used were proper. The responses to these are all under the control of the election officials and the local voting regulations.

The Electoral College

Again, the presidential race is unique in that it is a individual race in each state for a nationwide office. The proponents of states' rights wanted each state to have a single vote, whereas the federalists would have liked a simple popular vote. As a compromise, the electoral college was developed. Similar to the primary election, each state appoints one elector for each member of congress from their state - the smallest states having at least three votes and in California(in 2000), 54. The electors from each state meet in their state, certify their votes and send them to the president of the senate, who will open the envelopes before the full congress and tally the votes. If for any reason no candidate can win a majority - this can happen with a tie vote or a third party candidate taking some of the votes - a vote must be held in the House of Representatives and the winner will become president.

The Actual Voting Process

When you first enter your polling place, you will be directed to a table where all the voters of the precinct are listed. After giving your name so it can be found in the list, you must show a valid ID card and sign the list next to your name. You will then be given a ballot or magnetic card and directed to a voting area. No-one is allowed to see your vote or be in the area unless you request assistance from a poll worker. You may vote or skip any race you choose. If only one race or issue interests you, you can only vote for that one. If you want to protest by turning in a blank ballot, casting no vote, it is your right. If you are using a paper ballot you will have been given an envelope or shown how to fold the ballot, which you then carry to the ballot box and post.

The huge staff of poll workers required to keep the election going smoothly and fairly are a combination of public employees, paid volunteers and unpaid volunteers. The party affiliations of volunteers are balanced between the parties so as to avoid corruption. It is common for poll workers to place their own vote by absentee ballot so they can devote the full day to their duties. By law every employer in the US is required to allow everyone in his employ time to vote, unless their shift coincides with the entire time the polls are open, this requires no action on their part. There may be representatives for each of the major parties at each polling place to make sure that the rules are followed usually both will accompany the ballot box to the election centre.

Paper Ballots

The original method of voting was to give each voter a piece of paper with a place to mark next to each candidate or race. Because of the time and labour required to count these votes this method is rarely if ever used today. However, in all federal races voters are entitled to write in the name of anyone they choose - even Mickey Mouse if they so wish. Such 'candidates' rarely get enough votes to win but the right to vote for whomever they choose is a voter's right.

Lever Machine

These huge machines were quite popular in the 1950s. They have several banks of levers you swing down to cast a vote. To use one of these machines you walk up and pull a large lever that closes a curtain behind you. You can then pull down the small lever for each of your choices. If you wish to write in a name there is a sliding door with paper behind that you can open and write in your choice. When you push the big lever back to open the curtain all the levers and doors close and your vote is recorded in the machine.

Punch Card Ballot Machine

This is a plastic box a little bigger than a notebook. A series of loose leaf style pages are fitted over the box exposing a row of holes between each pair of pages. To vote you slide a blank punch card into a slot at the top of the ballot and as you flip from page to page you push a metal stylus through the hole next to the person you wish to vote for. If you think you may have made a mistake you may request another ballot from a poll worker. After [the election of 2000](#) these machines are rapidly being phased out.

Optical Scan Ballot

Similar to the paper ballot, these pre-printed forms have a circle that can be filled in with a pencil next to each voting choice. When the ballot is complete the voter waits while the ballot is read by a computer. Once the computer accepts the scan the ballot is placed in a ballot box and the voter may leave.

Touch Screen

Currently, one of the most popular options is a computer touch-screen not unlike an automated teller. The voter scrolls through a series of screens touching the screen for each choice. The computer will not allow more than one vote for each entry, unless it is allowed. After voting, the voter hits a square on the screen to record their vote.

Epilogue

Each county in the United States sets their own rules for voting, so this can at best give a brief overview of the system to those not familiar with it, rather than complete guide set in stone.

BBC Link

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A1304993>