# VOTING GUIDE

ELECTION 2020

News FOR YOU®

This brief voting guide comes to you from **News for You**®, the easy-to-read weekly newspaper and website. This guide explains who can vote and why every vote counts. It describes how Americans choose their leaders. It also tells you how to register and how to cast your ballot.

# WHO VOTES

Today, just about any U.S. citizen who is at least 18 years old can register to vote. But it hasn't always been that way. When the U.S. was new, only white males could vote. In 1870, all men won the right to vote regardless of color or race. Women weren't allowed to vote until 1920.

## Recent Patterns

Not everyone who can vote actually votes. The last presidential election was held in 2016. In that election, about 61% of voting-age citizens cast ballots. The other 39% didn't vote at all. In 2016, 137.5 million people voted — up 8.5 million from 2012.

Most people who register to vote actually do vote, says the U.S. Census Bureau. Older people, homeowners, and married people are most likely to go to the polls. People with more schooling, good jobs, and higher incomes are also more likely to vote.

Young people go to the polls less often than older ones. In the 2016 election, only 46.1% of citizens ages 18 to 29 voted.

The likelihood someone will vote differs among racial and ethnic groups. Here are the turnout figures for the 2016 elections:

- 65.3% of white non-Hispanic citizens
- 59.4% of black citizens
- 47.6% of Hispanic citizens
- 49% of Asian citizens

## Voting Limits

Most states limit voting by felons. Felons are people who have been found guilty of serious crimes.

A judge can decide a person is not mentally able to vote and bar that person from voting.

## Groups Once Barred From Voting

People in the following groups were once denied the right to vote either by a state or by the federal government. All of these groups can vote today.

- Non-whites
- Women
- People who didn't own land
- Catholics
- Non-Christians
- People between 18 and 21
- People who couldn't read or write
- Descendants of slaves
- American Indians

# REASONS TO VOTE

We may not all have wealth or power, but each person's vote counts the same as anyone else's. In voting, we are all the same.

Voting is a way to tell your leaders what you care about. When you vote, you help make government work for you. The examples on the right describe ways government can affect some issues that concern most people.

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Government at all levels has a big effect on our lives. As voters, we share equal power in choosing leaders to represent us in government.

Even if the person or measure you voted for doesn't win, your vote is still important. It shows there is support for another point of view.

Also, politicians notice who votes and who doesn't. They know they must pay attention to the issues the voters care about.

Of course, just because people have the right to vote doesn't mean they'll use it. Many people who can vote don't.

There are many reasons why people don't vote. Some think their vote won't make a difference. But many elections have shown otherwise. The 2000 election was one of the closest presidential elections in U.S. history. The Florida vote was especially close. George W. Bush finished ahead of Al Gore by just 537 votes.

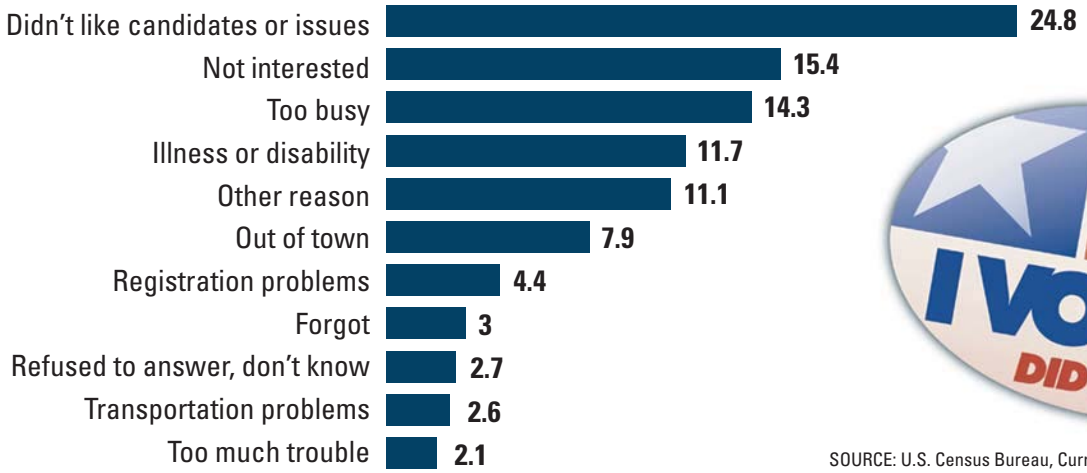
The graph below shows some reasons people gave for not voting in 2016.

## Reasons to Vote

- You care about clean air and clean water. The government makes laws that can protect or hurt the environment.
- You have family members in another country who want to move to the U.S. The government makes rules about who can move here and how easy it is.
- You are in school or have children in school. You want the school to provide a good education. The government makes rules about teacher training, programs, and testing. It decides what kinds of programs receive funding.
- You are looking for a job that offers a good wage and job security. The government guides the economy. That affects how easy it is to find a job, how much companies can pay workers, and what benefits companies must provide.

## Reasons Given for Not Voting

***(Percent of registered non-voters, 2016)***



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 2016.

# WHAT WE VOTE ON

Elections are about more than choosing a president. When you go to the polls on Election Day, you can vote for other leaders and perhaps ballot measures too. The choices you make can shape all levels of government.

## National Offices

People elected to national offices serve in the federal government. All elections for national offices take place in even-numbered years. Americans elect presidents in years that can be divided by 4, for example 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016.

Voters also elect members to represent them in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. Together the Senate and House of Representatives make up the U.S. Congress. These elected leaders make laws for the country.

Senators represent all the people of a state. Each state has two, so there are 100 U.S. senators.

Members of the House represent the people of a district. Some states have many districts. States with more people have more districts. Each district has one representative in the House. There are 435 voting representatives.

U.S. senators serve six-year terms. Senators aren't all up for election at once. About a third of Senate seats are decided in any even-numbered year.

U.S. representatives serve two-year terms. All House seats are voted on in every even-numbered year.

## State Offices

Voters choose a governor at the state level. They also choose state lawmakers. A body of lawmakers is called a legislature. State governments also include other offices, such as attorney general and controller.

Voters elect state leaders in even-numbered years.

## Local Offices

Voters elect local leaders, too. They run smaller governments within states. States can be divided into smaller units called counties, parishes, or boroughs.

Governments of these units are set up differently in different states. Usually one person is elected to lead the local government. There is almost always a legislature at this level as well.

Counties, parishes, and boroughs are divided into even smaller units. They may be called towns, townships, cities, or villages.

These smaller units of government also hold elections. Most cities elect mayors and city council members. The city council makes laws for the city.

Voters also elect people to serve in special offices. These officials might lead water or sewer districts. In addition, voters elect school board members to oversee school districts.

At the local level, some judges are elected. Others are picked by elected leaders.

## Ballot Measures

Besides voting for people, voters may need to decide on ballot measures, or propositions. These are proposed laws at the state or local level. They often deal with budgets and taxes. They can also deal with schools, development, crime, waste management, or anything that is important to communities. Voters choose "yes" to pass a measure or "no" to defeat it.

# CHOOSING A PRESIDENT

Presidential elections involve a complex process. First the political parties must select candidates. Later the candidates run against one another in the general election.

## The Beginning

People who hope to run for president start to raise money and begin campaigning at least a year before the general election. If a person wants to represent a political party, he or she must be nominated by party delegates at the national convention.

## Primary Elections and Caucuses

Delegates to the national convention are chosen through primary elections and caucuses. Every state has either a primary or a caucus system.

Most states use primary systems. In primary elections, voters go to the polls and cast their ballots. They choose the person they want to run in the general election from among those seeking their party's nomination.

Fewer states hold caucuses. These are meetings where voters of a certain party gather to choose delegates for their party's national convention.

Primary and caucus results tell which delegates will go to the national conventions. Each candidate gets a certain number of delegates. Usually delegates have promised to vote for a certain candidate at the national convention.

## National Conventions

The parties hold their national conventions in the summer before the general election. Each state sends a certain number of delegates to the convention.

To be nominated by their party, a candidate must win a majority of delegates at the convention.

The 2020 Republican National Convention will be in Charlotte, North Carolina. The 2020 Democratic National Convention will be in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

## General Elections

After each party's delegates have named named a candidate, the general election process begins. Candidates campaign around the country to try to win the support of voters.

In November, voters decide who they want to become president. They cast their ballots on Election Day, the Tuesday after the first Monday in November. In 2020, that is November 3. However, the president is not chosen directly by the voters, but by the Electoral College.

## The Electoral College

The U.S. Constitution requires that the Electoral College finally decide who will be president. The Electoral College is a group of citizens selected by the people to cast votes for president.

The candidate who wins a majority of the people's votes in each state gets all of the state's electoral votes. In the end, the presidential candidate who gets a majority of electoral votes wins the election.

The number of electors for each state is based on how many seats it has in Congress. The number is revised every 10 years. California has the most electoral votes, with 55. States get no fewer than three votes. The District of Columbia has three votes.

# POLITICAL PARTIES

A political party is an organized group of people that controls or seeks to control a government. Parties compete against one another in elections to keep or gain power.

Members of a party share some basic political goals. However, members may disagree on some issues.

## Major Parties

The U.S. has two major political parties: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.

The Democratic Party is the oldest party. It began in 1828 when a group of people came together to try to win the presidency for Andrew Jackson.

The Republican Party began in the 1850s as the party that opposed slavery.

In many states, both Democrats and Republicans have strong support. In some states and regions, however, voters have usually supported one party or the other.

## Third Parties

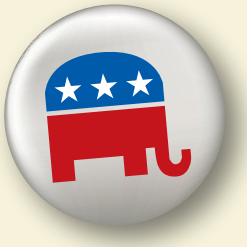
There have been many so-called third parties in the U.S. None of them has ever won the presidency. But many third-party proposals have gained widespread support.

Some of the larger third parties are the Constitution Party, the Green Party, and the Libertarian Party. All of those parties have offices and websites where you can learn about them.

## Non-Party Candidates

A person doesn't have to belong to a political party to run for office. Many people have run as independents. However, running a campaign is expensive. It is hard for anyone to run a successful campaign without the support of a political party.

**Republican Party**



**Democratic Party**

**Some Third Parties**

Constitution Party

Libertarian Party

Green Party

# GETTING INFORMED

Part of your responsibility as a voter is to learn about candidates and issues before Election Day. That will help you decide which candidates and ballot measures to vote for or against.

## Some Ways to Get Informed

- Watch TV and listen to the radio. Tune in for speeches, interviews, and debates.
- Listen carefully to campaign ads. They might not present facts or information in a balanced way.
- Read newspapers and magazines.
- Listen to organizations you belong to or trust.
- Talk with people you know. You can help each other learn about issues and decide how to vote.
- Read the candidates' websites.

Lots of information can be found on the internet. These sites have basic information about a range of candidates and issues:

- Rock the Vote
  www.rockthevote.org
- Vote411.org
  www.vote411.org
- Project Vote Smart
  votesmart.org
- PolitiFact
  www.politifact.com

# WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN A DEBATE

Debates between candidates can be useful to see how in a controlled setting candidates compare on issues that are important to you. But what should you watch for in a presidential debate? And how can you tell which candidate wins?

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The League of Women Voters offers a guide to watching debates. The guide is on the League's website at www.lwv.org/educating-voters/debate-watching-kit. The group educates citizens about government and political issues. But it does not support or oppose any candidate. The League has tips to help you prepare for, watch, and evaluate debates.

## Before the Debate

The League urges you to prepare before watching a debate. That will help you know what to look for so you get the information you need. It is important to:

- follow the race to learn about the candidates and their backgrounds
- decide which issues are most important to you
- think about the questions you would ask and the information you need to make an informed decision
- keep an open mind about the candidates, beyond their party memberships

## During the Debate

During the debate, the candidates answer questions from a moderator or from voters themselves. As you watch, ask yourself some questions:

- Do the questions cover issues that are important to you?
- Are the questions clear and fair? Are they equally tough on all candidates?
- Does the format give each candidate the same chance to state his or her views?
- How would you judge the work of the moderator?
- Do the candidates answer questions directly? Or do they give evasive answers?
- Are they specific about their views? Do they support their positions with facts and figures?
- Do they talk about their own positions? Or do they just attack the opponent?
- Are their proposals realistic?
- Does each candidate appear confident and relaxed?
- Do they respond naturally to questions? Or do their answers seem rehearsed?
- Do their answers show that they have changed their positions? If so, do they explain why?

## After the Debate

You may form opinions about the candidates as you watch a debate. But the League suggests that you take time to think about what you see and hear. That can help you sort your thoughts about the candidates. You can do this by:

- talking with others who watched the debate
- asking yourself if you learned something new about the issues or the candidates
- finding the issues on which you agree, or disagree, with each candidate
- figuring out which questions you still have
- getting more information from the candidates' websites or news reports
- watching later debates to see whether you still feel the same way about the candidates

These steps should help you answer the question, "Which candidate is most qualified for office?"

# POLITICAL CAMPAIGN ADS

The styles and techniques of campaign ads may change over the years. But the basic messages are still the same.

You can explore political ads from the last 60 years. "The Living Room Candidate" is an online exhibit of presidential campaign ads through TV history. You can find it at www.livingroomcandidate.org. The Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, New York, created it.

Visitors to the exhibit can watch the ads by year. They can choose ads by issue, such as war or taxes. They can also choose types of ads they want to see. Those might include ads that feature children, or that use fear, or that tell candidates' life stories.

There are some new techniques. For instance, many ads now use a candidate's own words against him or her. But what really defines today's advertising is speed.

New ads may come out within hours of a news event. Many are posted instantly on the internet before they are seen on TV. The number and speed of the ads can be overwhelming to voters.

With its exhibit, the museum tries to help viewers think about how they watch ads. When they see an old trick or technique, they can look past that to the real message. They can also check the facts in an ad by reading news reports and visiting websites such as www.factcheck.org.

# THINKING ABOUT THE MESSAGE

Sometimes political ads can act as unfair attacks on candidates. They can stretch the truth to make a candidate look bad. Be sure to pay close attention to how an ad is being used. Here are some things to think about as you watch ads during the presidential campaign:

## Who is sponsoring the ad?

Does the candidate "approve this message?" Or is another group acting for the candidate? If so, what is that group? What is its intent?

## Who is in the ad?

Does the candidate speak? Or does the campaign use others—such as an opponent or actors playing "real people"?

## What images are used?

Are the images light or dark? Are they still or fast-paced? How do they make you feel?

## What sound is used?

Sound—or the lack of it—is important in advertising. Is music included in the ad? If so, what type? How do you respond to it? If voices are used, do they sound upbeat or gloomy? Does the sound you hear match the message?

## What text is used?

In addition to images and sound, an ad may also include text to make or emphasize a point. If it is used, what does the text say? What is the purpose of the text?

## What facts are communicated?

Most campaigns make claims, either about their own candidate or the opponent. But such claims may or may not be true. What information is presented as fact? You can find out whether candidates' statements are true at www.factcheck.org.

# REGISTERING TO VOTE

Before you can vote, you need to register. That means signing up with the government office that runs elections where you live. You give the office your name, address, and some other information.

## Reasons

When you register to vote, that allows the elections office to record which voting district you live in. Then the office can tell you where you must go to vote.

Who you can vote for in state and local elections depends on your address. You can choose only candidates who are running to serve the area where you live.

The system that registers voters helps keep elections fair. It makes sure a person votes only once. The elections office gives each polling place a list of registered voters. When you go to vote, a poll worker will check a list for your name.

## Deadlines

Many of the rules for registering to vote differ around the U.S. Deadlines for registering vary from place to place. However, federal law says you can't be required to register more than 30 days before an election.

Most states require people to register 30 days before Election Day. Thirteen states allow people to register on the same day they vote. In North Dakota, people can vote without registering.

You must register to vote any time you change your address or your name. Try to register as soon as you can after the change. That will prevent rushing and problems close to an election.

## If English Isn't Your Main Language . . .

Perhaps English isn't your main language. Don't let that stop you from registering and voting. You might be able to get voting help in your main language.

A U.S. law requires certain places to provide voting help in a language besides English. That's true for areas where at least 10,000 people or 5 percent of voting-age people do not speak English well.

The law says those citizens must be given voting help in their main language. The local government must hire poll workers who speak that language. It must provide ballots, notices, forms, instructions, and other voting materials in the language.

Check with your local elections office to find out if you can get special language help. Be sure to do this well before Election Day!

## How to Register

In most places around the U.S. there are a few ways to register. You can do it in person or by mail. If you have access to the internet, you can begin the registration process online.

To register in person, go to one of the following places:

- a department of motor vehicle (DMV) office — the U.S. has a "Motor Voter" law. It says all motor vehicle offices in the country must offer voter registration forms.
- the local elections office
- a public aid office
- a public library
- a post office
- other government offices

To register by mail, call your local elections office. Ask them to mail you a voter registration form. Then fill it out and mail it back.

To begin the registration process online, go to vote.gov and select your state.

The District of Columbia and 38 states offer online voter registration. Others will require you to send in a form.

## Choosing a Party

The registration form will ask for your choice of political party. You do not have to choose one. In most places, though, you must choose a party to be able to vote in that party's primary.

Picking a party does not force you to vote for its candidates in the general election. You can vote for people from other parties if you wish.

## Proof of Registration

After you turn in your registration form, you should get a notice in the mail. It will confirm that you are on record as a registered voter. It should tell you where you can vote. The notice should arrive a few weeks after you turn in your form.

# CASTING YOUR VOTE

Election Day comes. It's time to make your voice heard!

## Polling Places

On Election Day, people vote in different sorts of places. Your voting site might be a school, a church, a community center, a fire station, or another neighborhood building.

You must go to the correct polling place. The place you go to vote will depend on where you live.

There are several ways of finding out where to vote:

- You might have received a notice after you registered to vote. Check it to see if it lists the address of your polling place.
- Call your local elections office. Be aware that the office could be very busy on Election Day. Calling before that day could help you find out what you need to know faster.
- Ask a neighbor.
- Check a local newspaper.

Find out both where and when to go. Polling places will be open only during certain hours. Usually, they open between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. and close between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m.

## Arriving to Vote

When you arrive at the voting site, you will need to sign in. You should see a table with poll workers near it.

A poll worker will ask for your name and your address. The worker will check for your name on a list of registered voters. In most places, you will be asked to sign your name. The worker might also ask for your ID.

Once you have signed in, you are ready to vote. You might want to look at a sample ballot before voting. If you do not see a sample ballot on display, ask for one.

A sample ballot looks just like the real ballot you will use when you vote. The sample lists the candidates. It presents any ballot measures that voters will be deciding on.

Reading the sample ballot can help the voting process go smoothly for you. You might feel less rushed when you use the voting device. You won't have to worry that you're taking too long and making other people wait.

## What You'll Need

Many states require voters to show an ID at the polling place. Even if your state doesn't require an ID, bringing one can be helpful. Poll workers might ask to see it to check your address.

## Voting by Mail

Even if you will be away from home on Election Day, you can still vote. You will have to mail in a paper ballot. In many places, this piece of paper is called an absentee ballot.

If you want to vote by mail, you must contact your local elections office. You should do so at least 45 days before the election. The office will send you a ballot in the mail.

Most states require voters' mail-in ballots to be received by the end of Election Day. You must make sure you mail your ballot early enough.

Many states let people vote by mail for any reason. Someone might choose to vote by mail just to avoid a trip to the polling place.

Other states require people to have a good reason for voting by mail. The voters must tell why they will be unable to go to the polling place.

# USING VOTING EQUIPMENT

When it's your turn to vote, you will go to a private area. Unless you tell someone, no one but you has to know how you voted.

The equipment used for voting differs from place to place. Poll workers can show you how a device works. Feel free to ask them for help.

If you have a question or problem while using the voting device, signal a poll worker. Wave or call for one to come over. You deserve to have your vote recorded and counted correctly.

In recent years, three main types of equipment have been used by U.S. voters. Most states use one or more of the types listed at the right.

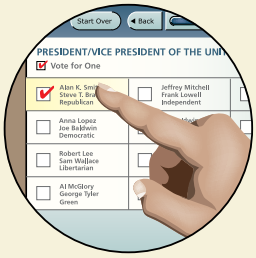
## Optical Scan Systems

A poll worker will give you cards or sheets of paper. Each piece has candidate names and ballot measures printed on it.

Take the cards over to a private table. Fill in the box or circle next to the candidate you want or your ballot measure choice. You will use a pen or pencil to make your marks.

When you have finished, you must either give the cards to a poll worker or feed the cards into a machine. Later, a computer will count the votes.

## Direct Recording Electronic Systems




More and more sites are getting direct recording electronic systems for voting. Different forms of these systems exist. Usually, a poll worker will give you a card that slides into a device. A computer screen will display possible choices for voters on some form of computer screen.

Voters make choices in different ways depending on the type of system. In many cases, you touch part of the screen. In other cases, you might push buttons on a keypad. These systems work something like the ATMs used for banking.

## Paper Ballots

If you vote by mail, you will use a paper ballot. A few places still use paper ballots at the polls. A poll worker will give you a piece of paper. You will take it to a private area. Then you will use a pencil or pen to mark a box next to the candidate's name or ballot-measure choice. When you are finished, drop the paper ballot into a ballot box or the mail.

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# VOTING VOCABULARY

Here are some definitions for important terms used in elections.

**ballot** – n. piece of paper used to vote; a process that allows people to vote in secret; total number of votes in an election

**campaign** – n. series of activities designed to produce a particular result

**candidate** – n. person who is trying to be elected

**caucus** – n. meeting of members of a political party for the purpose of choosing candidates for an election

**Congress** – n. group of people that makes laws for a country. The U.S. Congress has two houses, or groups: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

**debate** – n. discussion between candidates in which they express different opinions about something

**delegate** – n. person who is chosen or elected to vote or act for others

**district** – n. area or section of a city, town, or country

**Electoral College** – n. group of people chosen from each U.S. state who meet to elect the president and vice president of the U.S. based on the votes of all the people in each state

**general election** – n. regular election that involves voters and candidates throughout an entire country

**House of Representatives** – n. larger house of U.S. Congress

**poll** – n. place where people vote during an election; activity in which people are asked questions to get information about what most people think about something

**primary** – n. election in which members of the same political party run against each other for the chance to be in a larger election

**proposition** – n. suggestion for a change in a law on which people must vote

**register** – v. put your name on an official list

**Senate** – n. smaller group of the two groups that form the U.S. Congress

**turnout** – n. number of people who participate in something

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