



Plain Language Edition

Your Vote Counts:
A Self-Advocate's Guide to
Voting in the U.S.

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Introduction

What is voting?

Voting is a way to make decisions, and gets used to make all kinds of choices. Voting gets used for small decisions.

For example, friends can vote to decide what flavor of ice cream to buy. Voting can also be used for bigger decisions like deciding who runs the government, or passing a law. In this toolkit, we talk about voting on bigger decisions.

Why should I vote?

Voting is one of our most important rights. Laws affect our lives, and voting lets us have a say in what laws are made. This is important for people with disabilities! Voting is a way to speak up for ourselves and fight for laws we believe in.

Voting lets us have a say about who is in charge of the government. We can pick people who we agree with, and then they will help pass laws that we agree with.

It matters who you think should be in charge and what you think about laws. Voting is just as important for people with disabilities as it is for everyone else.

What kinds of votes are there?

The main way we vote is for **elected officials**. An elected official is someone who leads a part of the government. People vote to choose their elected officials. They vote for someone with ideas that they agree with, and then the elected official works to make those ideas into laws. The elected official wants people to keep voting for them, so they have to work to make laws that people want.

There are different kinds of elected officials. Some kinds of elected officials are:

- A member of Congress. Congress is the part of the U.S. government that makes laws. It has 2 parts: the Senate and the House of Representatives.
- A State Representative. They make laws only for their state.
- A city council member. They make laws for their city.
- The President of the United States. They make decisions for the whole country.
- A State Governor. They make decisions only for their state.
- A Mayor. They make decisions for their city.

When someone wants to be an elected official, they **run for office**. This means they explain their ideas and ask people to vote for them. Someone who is running for office is called a **candidate**.

Sometimes, you can vote to pass a law, but this only happens in some states. In other states, you can't vote to pass laws.

How do I choose who I want to vote for?

By voting, you get to help decide who is in charge of your city, state, and country.

It can be hard to choose who will do the best job. When you vote, you don't just vote for the candidate you like best. You vote for the candidate whose ideas you like best, and the decisions that candidate might make.

Lots of candidates run for office. Each one has different ideas about what the government should do. There are lots of ways to find out what ideas each candidate has. You can watch the news, read a newspaper or look up candidates online. Most candidates have a website that says their ideas.

You can also watch debates. **Debates** are when a group of candidates talk about their ideas to each other. They try and show that they have the best ideas. Sometimes, a debate will be on tv, and other times, you can watch a debate in-person.

You should learn about what each candidate thinks before you vote, and vote for someone if you like their ideas the most. You might not like any of the candidates, but you should still vote. Maybe one candidate has terrible ideas, and the other candidate only has okay ideas. Things will still be better if the okay candidate wins. If you don't vote, your voice isn't heard.

How do I get ready to vote?

You must be 18 years old (or older) to vote. Before you can vote, you need to **register** in most states. Registering means signing up to vote.

In North Dakota, you do not need to register to vote, but in every other state, you do need to register to vote.

In every state, you can register to vote in-person. To register in-person, you can go to one of these places:

- Your local Motor Vehicles Administration (MVA) or Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV).
- Your town hall or city hall.
- Your state or local election office.

There are other places you can register to vote, too. You can find out more places at <https://www.usa.gov/register-to-vote>.

In-person is not the only way to register. In most states, you can register to vote [online](#), or you can print out a [voter registration form](#) and send it in the mail.

Most states say you need a photo ID to vote. A photo ID is a government document that has your picture and other information about you on it. If you have a driver's license or a passport, you have photo ID already. If you don't have a photo ID, you can get one at your MVA or DMV, or your town or city hall.

What are political parties?

You register for a political party when you register to vote.

Political parties are groups of elected officials that work together to make laws that they all agree with. Different parties believe different things. In America, we have two main **political parties**: the Democrats and Republicans.

Republicans and Democrats believe different things. Your family or friends might like one party more than the other. You can decide which party you like better for yourself.

Only you get to decide the best way for you to vote. You can register as a Republican or as a Democrat. Or, you can register as an **independent**, which means you aren't a Republican or a Democrat.

You can change your party whenever you want. You just need to register again.

When Can I Vote?

You vote for laws and elected officials during an **election**. Elections usually happen at the beginning of November, in years that end in an even number. For example, the next state and U.S. government elections will be in 2020.

Different elected officials have different terms. A **term** is how long someone gets to be an elected official. When their term ends, they need to run for office again, and an election happens.

Here are some of the terms for elected officials:

- A Senator's term is 6 years. A member of the House of Representatives' term is 2 years. Members of Congress can have as many terms as they want, as long as people keep electing them.
- The President's term is 4 years. The President can only have two terms, which means no one can be President for more than 8 years.
- Different states have different terms for their Governors and State representatives.

Sometimes an elected official gets sick or breaks the law. They may have to stop being an elected official, so people need to vote for a new elected official.

The new vote has to happen right away, even if it is not election time. This is called a **special election**.

Special elections are elections that don't happen at the usual time. You can find out when elections will happen by going to [MyTimeToVote.com](https://www.mytimetovote.com).

What kinds of elections are there?

There are 2 main kinds of elections: general elections and primary elections. In **general elections**, you vote for who will become your elected officials.

Sometimes, there are too many candidates for one election. For example: Only 1 person from each political party can run for President. But lots of people want to be President, so each party votes on who their candidate will be.

This is called the **primary election**. It happens before the general election.

There are different primary elections for each political party. After the primary, there will only be a few candidates left, and they will run in the general election.

There are two kinds of primary elections: open primary elections and closed primary elections. When you register to vote, you pick a political party, and the party you pick can change which primary you're allowed to vote in.

In **open primary elections**, you can vote in whatever primary you want, but you can only pick one primary to vote in. For example:

- Dylan registered to vote as a Republican, and his state has open primary elections. Dylan decides to vote in the Democratic primary election, but he can't also vote in the Republican primary election. He can only vote in one primary election.

In **closed primary elections**, you can only vote for your own political party. If you register as a Democrat, you can vote in the Democratic primary, and if you register as a Republican, you can vote in the Republican primary. Democrats can't vote in the Republican primary, and Republicans can't vote in the Democratic primary.

For example:

- Richelle registered to vote as a Democrat, and her state has closed primary elections. Richelle can only vote in the Democratic primary election. She can't vote in the Republican primary election.

Some states only have open primary elections, and some states only have closed primary elections. It depends on your state.

What ways can I vote?

There are three main ways to vote:

(1) You can vote in-person on election day. To vote on election day, go to your polling place. A polling place is a place where you can vote. It is usually somewhere people can get to easily, like schools or community centers.

(2) In some states, polling places will open before election day. This is called early voting.

Early voting can be easier than voting on election day, since it is usually less crowded, so you can vote faster.

(3) Some states have another kind of voting called absentee voting. The word "absentee" means that something is not there. In absentee voting, you don't go to the polling place at all. You can vote through the mail, or you can drop off your vote at your polling place.

Different states have different rules about who can do absentee voting. You might be allowed to in your state, but you also might not. You can find out by going to <https://www.usa.gov/absentee-voting>

What Will Election Day Be Like?

Here is what happens when you vote on election day.

First, you have to go to your polling place. You can take a bus, train, taxi, ask a friend to drive you, or drive yourself. You can even walk there if you live close enough.

You can only vote at the polling place closest to where you live. You can find your polling place by going to <https://www.vote.org/polling-place-locator/>

There might be a line in front of the polling place. Lots of people come to vote, so make sure you are ready to wait.

When you go to the polling place, there might be people standing outside. They might want to give you a flyer or tell you who to vote for, but you don't have to talk to them.

Once you get inside, no one is allowed to talk about who to vote for. Don't ask people at the polling place who they will vote for, or who you should vote for. Don't tell people who you are voting for - it's a secret.

Poll workers work at polling places, and their job is to help people vote. To vote, you go up to a poll worker. They might ask to see your photo ID, and will make sure you are registered to vote. If you need help voting, you can ask the poll worker for help.

Next, the poll worker will give you a **ballot**. A ballot is a list of candidates you can vote for. There might also be laws or rules on your ballot, so you can vote on whether to pass the law. Most of the time, a ballot is a piece of paper, but sometimes, a ballot will be on a screen instead. You can press buttons on the screen to vote.

The poll worker will tell you to go to a booth, where you will fill out your ballot. The booths are private, so they keep voting a secret.

Once you fill out your ballot, it needs to get counted. Counting machines get set up at the polling place that count the votes for paper ballots. When you finish your ballot, you go to the machine.

Some polling places don't have counting machines. If there isn't a machine, you put your ballot in a box. If your ballot was on a screen, you are all set.

Congratulations! You voted! You made your voice heard.

The ballot can be hard to understand, so you may want to bring a friend, family member, or support person with you when you vote. They can come into the booth to help you, and can make sure you understand the ballot.

You can also study the ballot before you go to the polling place. You can find your ballot by going to <https://www.headcount.org/your-ballot/>. You can bring notes with you into the polling place to help you remember the candidates you want to vote for.

Poll workers can't help you choose who to vote for. Who you vote for is your choice!

Voting With A Disability

Poll workers are supposed to help people vote. They can help you read voting forms, or figure out how to use voting machines.

Poll workers need to help people with disabilities vote. They can't ask what your disability is. They just need to help you vote. They can't stop you from getting help to vote, or bringing a support person. They can't stop you from voting if you have a support person.

Sometimes, poll workers won't let you vote because of your disability. This goes against our rights! If that happens, there are people you can call to help you. You can call your **Protection and Advocacy organization (P&A)**, who help people with disabilities fight for our rights. They make sure states follow disability laws. There is a P&A in every state, and you can find out how to contact your P&A at the end of this toolkit.

Here is a story about voting in California. In California, you don't need a voter ID, but you do need to register to vote. In this story, everything goes right for Sally.

Sally walks to her polling place, which is a school near her house. She gets in line to wait to talk to a poll worker. The poll worker asks Sally her full name and address, and Sally tells the poll worker her full name and address.

The poll worker gives Sally a ballot, and explains how to fill out the ballot. Sally has trouble understanding the ballot, so she asks another poll worker to help her. The poll worker and Sally decide that Sally needs a large print ballot, so the poll worker gives Sally the large print ballot.

Sally takes out some notes about who she wants to vote for. She fills out the ballot, and then she gets in line again to take her ballot to another poll worker.

The poll worker helps Sally put the ballot in the machine that counts the votes.

The machine takes Sally's ballot, and then, Sally gets a sticker that says "I voted!"

How Does a Candidate Win an Election?

Most of the time, the candidate who gets the most votes wins.

Sometimes, candidates get the same number of votes, or the number of votes is too close to figure out the winner. When this happens, the election gets done over again, which is called a **runoff**.

Sometimes, candidates think that the vote counting wasn't fair. The candidate might ask for the votes to be counted again, which is called a **recount**.

There are different rules for the President of the United States. When the President is elected, it's not just about how every person voted - it's about how every state voted. We can tell how states voted with the **Electoral College**. The Electoral College is how states decide who becomes the President. Each state has votes in the Electoral College, but each state has a different number of votes. Some states get more votes than others.

Sometimes, one candidate will get more people to vote for them, but the other candidate will get more state votes. The candidate with the most state votes wins the Electoral College, and becomes President.

For example:

Sally is running for President. Sally got the most votes in California, so she won the state of California. California gets 55 votes in the Electoral College.

Sally also wins the most votes in the whole country, but her voters only live in a few states, so she doesn't win the Electoral College. Even though she has the most people voting for her, Sally loses the election.

She can run again in 4 years.

What is voter suppression?

Sometimes people will make laws to stop other people from voting, or make it harder for some people to vote. This is called **voter suppression**.

America has a lot of voter suppression. In the past, people tried to stop groups like women, Native Americans, and African Americans from voting, since they didn't want those groups to make decisions. Sometimes, people made these groups pay to vote, or these groups had to show they could read and write before they could vote.

People even got hurt or killed for trying to vote.

Women, African Americans, and Native Americans fought for their right to vote. The right for everyone to vote is now a part of the **Constitution** - a list of the most important laws in America.

In 1965, the government also made a law called the Voting Rights Act. This law helps make sure everyone has the right to vote by making it against the law to stop people from voting.

For example:

- Sometimes, people had to pay before they could vote. The Voting Rights Act said this is against the law, so now you can't make someone pay to vote.

The Constitution and the Voting Rights Act say everyone can vote. But the laws don't always work, and people still make it hard for others to vote. Voter suppression still happens today.

Elected officials can make new polling places, or get rid of polling places.

One kind of voter suppression is to have less polling places in a city. This makes people wait a long time to vote. Waiting in line is hard, so fewer people end up voting.

Some cities may have more polling places than others. It's easier to vote in cities with more polling places, and it's harder to vote in cities with less polling places. More people will vote in cities with more polling places, and less people will vote in cities with less polling places. This is a way to control who gets elected.

For example:

- Mr. McGreedyPants is the Mayor of Everytown. He wants to keep his job. He is a Democrat, so he wants more Democrats to vote.
- Mr. McGreedyPants closes some polling places in the west part of Everytown, where many Republicans live. He opens more polling places in the east part of Everytown, where many Democrats live.
- Now, it is harder for Republicans to vote in Everytown, and easier for Democrats to vote in Everytown. That makes it easier for Mr. McGreedyPants to keep getting elected.

Most polling places aren't accessible to everyone with a disability. This is against the law, since it makes it harder for people with disabilities to vote. This is also voter suppression. Voting needs to be accessible to everyone.

Sometimes, an elected official will close a polling place that is not accessible.

They will say they closed it to be fair to people with disabilities, but they are lying. They actually closed the polling place to stop people from voting. This is voter suppression, too.

It isn't fair to blame people with disabilities! Elected officials need to make sure all polling places are accessible, and closing polling places doesn't help.

Another kind of voter suppression is making people have photo ID to vote. Getting a photo ID costs money, and not everyone has enough money to get a photo ID.

It isn't fair to make people pay for a photo ID so they can vote. It is the same as making people pay to vote, and that's against the law.

Voter suppression looks different today than it did before. Before, there were no laws about voter suppression. Now we have laws, like the Constitution and the Voting Rights Act, that say everyone can vote. But people find ways to get around the laws.

Voter suppression happens for the same reasons that it did before - to stop some people from making decisions.

How can I help stop voter suppression?

Voter suppression is unfair. But we can work to fix voter suppression and make sure everyone can vote.

You can work with your state to stop voter suppression and make new laws to fix voter suppression. Here are ways you can help change your state's voting laws:

- You can write to your elected officials, and tell them that everybody should be allowed to vote.
- You can also call your elected officials, or meet with your elected officials in-person.
- You can also work with self-advocacy groups near you. You can talk to your P&A, or find other groups in your state that work on voting rights.

For more information, look at ASAN's [Civic Engagement Toolkit](#), where you can find more tips there about talking to your elected officials. Let's work together to fight for the right to vote!

Am I Allowed to Vote?

In some states, people with intellectual disabilities are not allowed to vote. The laws that say this are usually very old, but nobody got rid of them. People can still use these laws to take away our rights, which is a kind of voter suppression, too.

Some people with disabilities have **guardians**. A guardian can make legal decisions for a person with disabilities, and is usually a parent or family member. A judge chooses who will be the guardian for a disabled person. In some states, people with guardians can't vote, and in other states, people with guardians can vote unless a judge says no.

And in other states, people with intellectual disabilities can vote just like everyone else.

At the end of this toolkit, there is a list of every U.S. state. Find your state to find out the rules about voting where you live. If you can't vote, you can work on getting your rights back, and if you can vote, you can work to help others get their rights!

Words to Know

absentee voting

When you don't have to go to a polling place to vote. You can vote through the mail.

ballot

A list of who and what you can vote for.

candidate

Someone who is running for office.

closed primary election

A kind of primary election. You have to register with a political party to vote in their primary.

Congress

The part of the U.S. government that makes laws. It has 2 parts: the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Constitution

A list of the most important laws in America. It says that every American has rights that can't be taken away.

debate

When a group of candidates talk about their ideas to each other. They try and show why they should win the election.

Democrats

One of the two main political parties in America.

early voting

When polling places open for a while before election day. Not all states have early voting.

elected official

A person picked by voting to lead a part of the government.

Electoral College

How states decide who becomes the President. Each state has votes in the Electoral College.

general election

An election that decides who will represent all or part of America.

guardian

Someone who makes decisions for a person with disabilities. A judge decides who someone's guardian will be.

Independent

Someone who isn't a Republican or a Democrat.

open primary election

A kind of primary election. You can vote without registering for a political party.

photo ID

A paper or card given to you by the government. It has your picture and other information about you on it.

political parties

Groups of elected officials that believe the same things and work together.

poll Workers

People who work at polling places. They help others vote.

polling place

Somewhere people go to vote. Schools and community centers are two kinds of polling places.

primary election

A vote for who should represent the Democrats or Republicans in the general election.

Protection and Advocacy

A group that helps disabled people when they have problems with the law. Every state has one.

recount

When votes get counted again if an election is very close or if something goes wrong.

Republicans

One of the two main political parties in America.

runoff

Doing an election over again because it wasn't clear who won.

special election

Any election that happens when an elected official has to quit. It chooses a new elected official at a different time than other elections.

term

How long someone is allowed to be an elected official before they have to run for office again.

voter suppression

Unfair laws and other tricks that keep people from voting.

voting

A way to make decisions. It gets used to choose elected officials, pass laws, or making other kinds of choices.