



Why do elections matter?





Elections help ensure that power passes in a peaceful, orderly manner from citizens to their elected representatives—and from one elected official to his or her successor.

The U.S. Constitution gives certain powers to the national (or “federal”) government and reserves others for the individual states, and the people. In many countries, national governments set education and health policies, but in the U.S., the 50 states have primary responsibility in these areas. National defense and foreign policy are examples of federal responsibility.

The Constitution requires that each state have a republican form of government, and it forbids states from violating certain specified rights (e.g., “No State shall...deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”). But states otherwise retain considerable power.

The American system can appear complicated, but it ensures that voters have a voice at all levels of government.

- CALIFORNIANS WAIT TO VOTE AT A POLLING PLACE IN LOS ANGELES' VENICE BEACH DISTRICT, NOVEMBER 4, 2008.



Who votes?



When George Washington was elected as the first president in 1789, only 6 percent of the U.S. population could vote. In most of the original 13 states, only landowning men over the age of 21 had the right to vote.

Today, the U.S. Constitution guarantees that all U.S. citizens over the age of 18 can vote in federal (national), state and local elections.

- THE ONLY ELECTED FEDERAL OFFICIALS ARE THE PRESIDENT, VICE PRESIDENT AND MEMBERS OF CONGRESS—THE 435 MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE 100 SENATORS.



Which public officials are elected?

The U.S. Constitution sets the requirements for holding federal office, but each of the 50 states has its own constitution and its own rules for state offices.

For example, governors in most states serve four-year terms, but in other states the governor is elected for only two years. Voters in some states elect judges, while in others judges are appointed to office. States and localities elect thousands of public officials—from governors and state legislators to school board members and even dogcatchers.

The only elected federal officials are the president and vice president, and members of Congress—the 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the 100 senators.



Can anyone run for political office?



The U.S. Constitution establishes the requirements for holding an elected federal office.

To serve as president, one must be a natural-born* citizen of the United States, at least 35 years old, and a resident of the United States for at least 14 years. A vice president must meet the same criteria. Under the 12th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the vice president cannot have served two terms as president.

Candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives must be at least 25 years old, have been U.S. citizens for seven years, and be legal residents of the state they seek to represent in Congress. U.S. Senate candidates must be at least 30, U.S. citizens for nine years, and legal residents of the state they wish to represent.

★ NATURAL-BORN CITIZEN IS SOMEONE WHO WAS A U.S. CITIZEN AT BIRTH WITH NO NEED TO BE NATURALIZED.



Requirements to hold federal office



A federal office holder must meet certain requirements



	Minimum Age	U.S. Citizenship and Residence
★ PRESIDENT	35 yrs	Natural-born* U.S. citizen; reside in the U.S. for 14 years before the election
★ VICE PRESIDENT	35 yrs	Natural-born* U.S. citizen; reside in the U.S. for 14 years before the election and must reside in a different state than the president
★ SENATOR	30 yrs	U.S. citizen for 9 years; reside in the state from which elected
★ REPRESENTATIVE	25 yrs	U.S. citizen for 7 years; reside in the state from which elected



When are elections held?



Elections for federal office are held in even-numbered years.

The presidential election is held every four years and takes place on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

Elections for all 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are held every two years.

U.S. senators serve six-year terms that are staggered so that one-third (or one-third plus one) of the 100 senate seats come up for election every two years.

If a senator dies or becomes incapacitated while in office, a special election can be held in an odd-numbered year or in the next even-numbered year. The newly elected senator serves until the end of the original senator's term. In some states, the governor appoints someone to serve the remainder of the original term.



How many times can a person be president?



- THE WHITE HOUSE, IN WASHINGTON, D.C., HAS BEEN THE OFFICIAL OFFICE AND RESIDENCE OF THE PRESIDENT SINCE 1800.

After George Washington, the first president, declined to run for a third term, many Americans believed that two terms in office were enough for any president.

None of Washington's successors sought a third term until 1940, when, at a time marked by the Great Depression and World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt sought, and won, a third presidential term. He won a fourth term in 1944 and died in office in 1945. Some people thought that was too long for one person to hold presidential power. So in 1951, the 22nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, which prohibits anyone from being elected president of the United States more than twice.



What about other political offices?



There are no term limits for members of Congress. Term limits, if any, for state and local officials are spelled out in state constitutions and local ordinances.

The two chambers of the U.S. Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate, have nearly equal powers, but their means of election are quite different.

The Founders of the American Republic intended members of the House of Representatives to be close to the public, reflecting the public's wishes and ambitions.

Therefore, the Founders designed the House to be relatively large to accommodate many members from small legislative districts and to have frequent elections (every two years).

- THE U.S. CONGRESS CONSISTS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE SENATE.

Each of the 50 states is entitled to one seat in the House, with additional seats allocated according to population.

Alaska, for example, has a very small population and therefore has only one U.S. representative. California, the most populous state, has 55. Every 10 years the U.S. Census is taken, and House seats are reallocated among the states based on the new population figures.

Each state draws the boundaries of its congressional districts. States have considerable latitude in how they do this, so long as the number of citizens in each district is as close to equal as possible. Unsurprisingly, when one party controls the state government, it tries to draw the boundaries to the benefit of its own congressional candidates.

The Senate was designed for its members to represent larger constituencies—an entire state—and to provide equal representation for each state, regardless of population.

Thus, small states possess as much influence (two senators) as large states in the Senate.



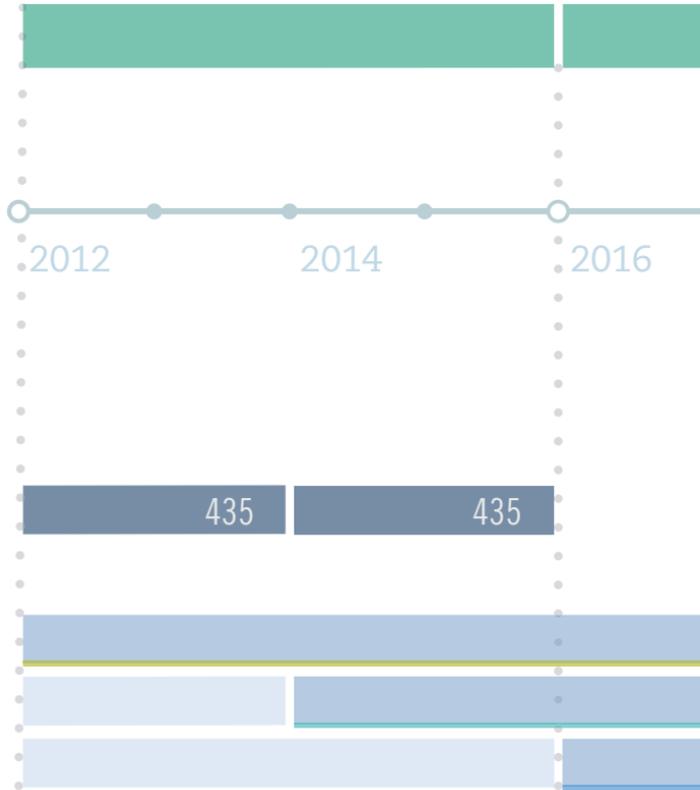
The two chambers of the U.S. Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate, have nearly equal powers, but their means of election are quite different.



Elections for federal office

Elections for federal offices are usually held in even-numbered years.

Presidents and vice presidents are elected every 4 years. In the U.S. Congress, senators are elected every 6 years and representatives are elected every 2 years.



PRESIDENT
VICE PRESIDENT

U.S. CONGRESS

REPRESENTATIVE
SENATOR

U.S. President
U.S. Vice President
Elected every

4 years

2018

2020

2022

U.S. House of
Representatives

All 435 representatives
elected every

435

2 years

U.S. Senate

33 out of 100 senators
elected every

33/100

33/100

2 years

34/100