



Who conducts U.S. elections?



In the United States, elections—even those for federal office—are conducted locally. Thousands of administrators—typically civil servants who are county or city officials or clerks—are responsible for organizing and conducting U.S. elections.

These administrators perform an important and complex set of tasks:

- Setting the exact dates for elections.
- Certifying the eligibility of candidates.
- Registering eligible voters and preparing lists of registered voters.
- Selecting voting equipment.
- Designing ballots.
- Organizing a large temporary workforce to administer the voting on Election Day.
- Tabulating the votes and certifying the results.

- THOUSANDS OF ADMINISTRATORS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ORGANIZING AND CONDUCTING U.S. ELECTIONS.



Most U.S. election results are not particularly close, but occasionally there are races with a very small margin of victory or races in which the outcome is contested and votes are recounted. This happened in parts of Florida during the 2000 U.S. presidential election—the closest in U.S. history. That race forced many Americans to consider the myriad administrative tasks surrounding their elections for the first time.



The U.S. Constitution gives citizens age 18 and above the right to vote. There is no national list of eligible voters, so localities create them, by requiring citizens to register as voters. This is to prevent fraud. In the past, selective registration procedures were used to discourage some citizens—most notably, African Americans in the South—from voting. Today, the Voting Rights Act prohibits these discriminatory practices.

Each state establishes its own registration requirements. Citizens who move are required to re-register at their new place of residence. At times, states have made registration easier and at other times they have tightened the requirements. In 1993, the National Voter Registration Act made it possible for citizens to register to vote when they renew their state-issued driver's license. Some states allow voters to register on Election Day. Recently, however, some states have passed laws that require government-issued identification or eliminate registration on Election Day.

Election administrators must ensure that every eligible voter who wants to vote is on the registration list. They also must exclude from the list those who are unqualified (typically because they are too young or do not live in the jurisdiction). Generally, local election officials keep people on the lists even if they have not voted recently, rather than excluding potentially eligible voters. When someone not on the registration list appears at the polls, officials typically issue them a provisional ballot to record their votes. Only after that person's eligibility is reviewed (this usually happens after Election Day) is the vote counted.

Election administrators also have to design the ballots for each election. They must ensure that all certified candidates are listed and all issues up for decision are correctly worded. And they must try to make the ballot as simple and as clear as possible.

There are no national standards for ballot forms, but federal law does require that administrators provide ballots in multiple languages when a percentage of the population in their jurisdiction does not speak English as a primary language.

Where voting machines have replaced paper ballots, local administrators are responsible for selecting and maintaining them. And local officials also must recruit and train a large temporary staff to work 10 to 15 hours on Election Day.

- IT TAKES THOUSANDS OF LOCAL VOLUNTEERS AND OFFICIALS TO RUN U.S. ELECTIONS.





How do Americans vote?





Since local authorities rather than a single national authority conduct elections, different localities—even in the same state—can have different types of ballots and voting technology.

Today, very few U.S. voters mark paper ballots by putting an “X” next to a candidate’s name. That’s because many localities use optical systems that mechanically scan paper ballots on which voters fill in circles or connect lines. Still others employ a wide variety of mechanized voting devices.

In recent years, several states have adopted procedures that make ballots available to voters before the election. This trend started with provisions for absentee ballots, issued to voters who anticipate being away from their home (and their voting place) on Election Day. Some states and local jurisdictions gradually liberalized this provision, allowing citizens to register as “permanent absentee voters” and routinely have a ballot mailed to their home. Two states—Oregon and Washington—conduct their elections entirely by mail. Absentee voters generally return their completed ballots by mail.

Some states now allow citizens to vote up to three weeks before Election Day using voting machines in shopping malls and other public places. Citizens stop by at their convenience to cast their votes.

- A UNITED STATES FLAG SERVES AS A BACKDROP AS PEOPLE VOTE AT LINDELL SCHOOL IN LONG BEACH, NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 6, 2012.



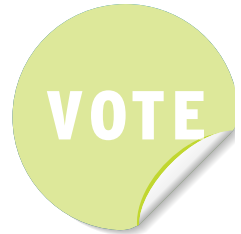
Does early voting affect election results?

No, because even when citizens vote early, their votes are not counted until the polls close on election night.

This prevents official information from being released about which candidate is ahead or behind, which could possibly influence voters who wait until Election Day to vote.

The one thing that all U.S. localities have in common is that no votes are officially tabulated and publicized until after the polls have closed.

Although U.S. television networks often conduct a joint exit poll of people who have just voted in the national elections, this practice has received critical scrutiny in recent years.



- MANY AMERICANS VOTE BY ABSENTEE BALLOT; THEIR VOTES ARE COUNTED AFTER ELECTION DAY.





What is the United States doing to keep elections fair in the future?





- PEOPLE IN UNIVERSITY PARK, MARYLAND, WAITED HOURS TO VOTE IN THE 2008 ELECTION.

One of the important lessons of the extremely close 2000 presidential election was that the election administration, balloting and vote-counting challenges encountered in Florida could have occurred almost anywhere in the United States. Several studies were commissioned, and a variety of panels heard expert witnesses and took testimony about the need for reform.

In 2002, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act to address the problems of the 2000 election and anticipate new ones. First, the federal government funded state and local efforts to replace outdated punch-card and lever voting machines. Second, it established the Election Assistance Commission to afford local election technical assistance and to help local officials establish voting device standards. The commission studies voting machine and ballot design, registration and provisional voting methods, techniques for deterring fraud, procedures for recruiting and training poll workers, and voter education programs.

The Help America Vote Act marks a significant expansion of the federal government's role in a matter traditionally left to localities. But the reforms introduced have helped restore faith in the U.S. election process.



Every vote counts.

