

National Academy of Public Administration Elections Working Group 8/28/24

Introduction/Overview

The National Academy of Public Administration's Elections Working Group (EWG) was established to focus on the first of the Academy's Twelve Grand Challenges: Protect Electoral Integrity and Enhance Voter Participation. Public trust and active participation in our elections are fundamental to our democracy. Increasingly, trust is undercut by the spread of misinformation and a lack of knowledge regarding the election process itself, as well as the extensive efforts at all levels of government to ensure that election results are fair, honest, and accurate.

The Academy Board has [released a statement](#) about the importance of this challenge and urges each Fellow to “commit to finding at least one way that they can share the accurate information that is needed to help restore and preserve trust in our elections.”

To help Fellows, the EWG has compiled responses to the following Frequently Asked Questions, utilizing official sources. These will appear weekly in Management Matters.

The Academy is a nonpartisan organization and does not manage or make decisions related to election administration. All the information in this document was collected by Academy Fellows from primary sources. Please verify the information's accuracy via the links in this document, with your local election office, or with state/federal election resources.

FAQs related to Voter Registration

In every state except North Dakota, voters must be registered to vote, and they must be registered at the place where they reside. This is a fundamental requirement of the US election system. An address change means a previously registered voter must register again.

1. Can non-citizens/undocumented immigrants vote in Federal or state-wide elections in the United States? What about convicted felons?

It is illegal for a non-citizen to vote in any Federal or statewide election.

It has been common practice to make felons ineligible to vote, in some cases permanently. In recent decades, there has been a trend to

reinstate the right to vote at some point, but this is a state-by-state policy decision. See below for a link to the laws in your state. Visit the [NCSL Election Resources](#).

Source: <https://www.usa.gov/who-can-vote>

Who can vote?

You can vote in U.S. federal, state, and local elections if you:

- Are a U.S. citizen (some areas allow non-citizens to vote in local elections only)
- Meet your state's residency requirements
 - [You can be experiencing homelessness](#) and still meet these requirements.
- Are 18 years old on or before Election Day
 - In almost every state, you can register to vote before you turn 18 if you will be 18 by Election Day.
 - Some states allow 17-year-olds who will be 18 by Election Day to vote in primaries.
- Are registered to vote by your state's [voter registration deadline](#). North Dakota does not require voter registration.

Who cannot vote?

- Non-citizens, including permanent legal residents, cannot vote in federal, state, and most local elections.
- [Some people cannot vote after being convicted of a felony](#) or if they are currently serving time for other types of crimes. Rules are different in each state. [Check this guide from the Department of Justice \[PDF, 541KB\]](#) to understand the laws in your state.
- [Some people who have a mental disability may not be able to vote.](#)
- U.S. citizens residing in U.S. territories cannot vote for president in the general election.

Check with your [state or local election office](#) if you have any questions.

2. What are the basic rules for student voting?

Resource: [Toolkit for the Promotion of Voter Participation for Students](#)

Source: <https://vote.gov/guide-to-voting/college-student>

Voter registration is tied to where you live. As a college student, you can usually register to vote in either your hometown or where you attend college, depending on your state's residency requirements. If you want to vote from your hometown but are not residing there now, you must request an absentee ballot and mail it back. Since there are deadlines for both of those actions, this must be done well before Election Day.

Keep in mind that you can live in more than one place, but you are only allowed to vote in one.

As always, check with your state or local election office to ensure you understand the rules for students voting where you live - <https://www.usa.gov/state-election-office>.

3. What is “same-day registration,” and how does that system work?

Source: [2022 EAVS report](#)

In addition to requiring voters to register before an election, some states allow individuals to register to vote and cast a ballot on the same day. Almost half of the states reported allowing individuals to register on the same day that they cast a ballot in person or request a mail ballot. This process is known as Same-Day Registration (SDR), and all the given state’s registration eligibility requirements apply. Registration is a separate process from voting. Combining the two when you go to the polls is a great opportunity for those who missed the voter registration deadline, but the combination will take longer.

Among states with SDR, about 85% reported having both SDR on Election Day and SDR during in-person early voting. Fourteen states reported having SDR during an overlap between the start of early voting and the close of voter registration.

Additional information can be found at NCSL: <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/same-day-voter-registration>

4. How can I find out if I’m registered or not?

Check with your state or local election office to find out.

FAQs related to Casting a Ballot

There are several different ways for voters to cast their ballots. These include in-person voting on Election Day, “vote by mail” (which may also be called absentee voting), in-person early voting, and casting a provisional ballot on Election Day. The specifics vary by state and locality, so please check your state and local election offices.

5. How secure is our election system? Can election systems technology used by states and localities be hacked by external (both

domestic and international) actors? Can results be compromised in other ways?

Security is essential to trustworthy elections. Federal, state, and local election officials utilize various techniques to ensure security, with the specifics varying somewhat by state and local law. In most states, counties are responsible for running elections. In addition, each state has a chief election official who ensures that laws and procedures are strictly followed.

Visit eac.gov/vote for quick links to your state or territory's elections website for information about election security in your state.

Security for Voting Technology

The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) develops voluntary voting system guidelines (VVSG), which are a set of specifications and requirements, including security and integrity standards, that voting systems must meet to receive certification. The EAC also accredits voting labs that test voting systems to these standards. Participation in the EAC testing and certification program is voluntary, but most states use the EAC's testing and certification program. States may also choose to enact stricter requirements for voting systems.

Every state and local jurisdiction utilizes a range of procedures and tools to safeguard the voting process and ensure its election results can be trusted.

Common "best practice" security measures used by local election officials include:

- Purchasing tested and certified voting systems
- Using locks, tamper-evident seals, and security cameras
- Establishing physical and cybersecurity access controls
- Testing the accuracy of voting equipment before and after elections
- Programming all devices according to local and state laws and regulations

Operational Security Measures Used by Local Election Offices

- Recruiting and training qualified professional staff and poll workers
- Conducting elections with bipartisan poll workers and observers
- Verifying that the total number of voted ballots matches the total number of people who voted
- Auditing the ballots to ensure that the voting equipment counted votes accurately

- Documenting and verifying by at least two (ideally bipartisan) witnesses the transfer of all ballots and voting equipment from one team or place to the next
- Ballots are required to be securely stored after the election so that they can be reviewed as part of an audit or recount.
- Ballots always remain in the custody of the local election officials conducting the election.

For more information about election security, see <https://www.eac.gov/voters/election-security>.

Procedures for Tabulation and Reporting of Results

The following processes are used at both the local and state levels.

Election officials count as many ballots on election night as possible, but election night results are unofficial and never final. Each state has different rules for when mail, provisional, military, and overseas ballots can be counted. For example, some states require all mail ballots to be received by Election Day. Others allow mail ballots to be counted if they are postmarked by Election Day and received by a certain date.

Once all the ballots have been received, the vote counting (officially known as the canvassing) begins. This process usually involves analyzing vote totals to identify and resolve discrepancies between the number of voters and the number of ballots cast. Most states also conduct audits to further verify that the vote totals are accurate.

Once the canvass (and, in many states, audits) has been completed, the election results are certified as final. For more information about election results, canvass, and certification, see: <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/election-results-canvass-and-certification>

Some races or contests may be recounted after the certification process because the contest was tight or a candidate or interest group requested it. Recounts differ from audits in that every ballot in a contest or a subset of contests in the election is recounted, and the official results of the election may change as a result.

Each state provides the voting results for national races (president and vice president). These results are later certified by Congress, but there is no additional national tabulation of the results.

Source: <https://www.eac.gov/voters/voter-faqs>

6. Is “voting by mail” safe in terms of ensuring both that a ballot will be counted and that non-citizen ballots won’t be?

Source: <https://www.nased.org/faqs>

States vary in terms of what is necessary to qualify to receive a mail or absentee ballot. In some, reasons are needed to justify the request. Some states allow voters to obtain “permanent” absentee status. Eight states plus the District of Columbia allow all elections to be conducted by mail (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, and Washington).

Each state and territory has a slightly different process for verifying mail ballots, but in general:

- Before a mail ballot is sent to a voter, a unique ID number on the outbound mailing envelope is recorded in the voter registration database. This number matches a number on the return mailing envelope. These numbers allow election officials to know which envelope, or ballot package, is sent to and received from which voter without violating the secrecy of the ballot. If a voter requests another ballot, the unique ID number is recorded for the new ballot, too. This helps election officials ensure that only one ballot per voter is tabulated.
- When a ballot is returned from a voter, the election office verifies that the number on the mailing envelope matches the number on the mailing envelope assigned to the voter when the ballot was sent out. This is why there can only be one ballot per envelope.
- Election workers verify that the envelope has all the required voter information on it. This varies by state or territory but can include the voter’s signature, the date, and other information. If this information is incomplete, each state and territory has laws and procedures for how to treat these ballots. Some permit voters to provide the missing information, which is known as a ballot “cure” process.
- If the ballot envelope has all the required information, in many states and territories, election workers verify that the signature on the ballot envelope matches the signature on file. While some places permit the use of technology to expedite the process, a human reviews every signature.
- Once the required information is validated, the ballot can be removed from the outer envelope. Both the envelope and the ballot are retained as election records, but they must be separated to ensure the secrecy of each ballot.
- Ballots are flattened to remove creases and then tabulated. While election officials often tabulate mail ballots as their own category, they are treated as

regular ballots. Every eligible mail ballot is tabulated and included in the official canvass of results for every election.

7. What security measures are used to prevent tampering with ballots put in drop boxes?

Source: <https://www.eac.gov/voters/voter-faqs>

Some states allow voters to return their mail/absentee ballots in a secure drop box. Drop boxes eliminate the need for return postage because they allow voters to return their ballot directly to election officials instead of using the Postal Service. This can be useful for voters who may not have enough time to return their ballot through the mail.

Each state has its own rules and requirements for securing drop boxes. Often, these requirements include specific locks or seals, video surveillance, and chain of custody requirements. Some states and localities only place drop boxes in government buildings or secure designated locations in a jurisdiction. Only election officials (often bipartisan teams) are authorized to collect ballots once they are placed in a drop box. To learn more about how election officials secure drop boxes, see [guidance](#) issued by the EAC and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency (CISA) on effectively using and securing drop boxes.

8. Why can't we get the final election results on election night? Why can some states report election results quickly while others take days or weeks to tabulate results?

Source: <https://www.eac.gov/voters/voter-faqs>

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9. What are provisional ballots, and how does that system work?

Source: <https://www.nased.org/faqs>

Provisional ballots are issued for voters whose eligibility is unclear. This may be because they are at the wrong polling station and their name is therefore not on the list of registered voters for that location, or they do not have the required identification, or for some other reason. In some states, a voter who needs to demonstrate residency can have their ballot “cured” if the voter returns within the required timeframe to provide the required information. In some states, provisional ballots are called affidavit ballots or challenge ballots.

The Help America Vote Act of 2002 requires provisional ballots, but six states are exempt from the requirement: Idaho, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming, however, do issue provisional ballots.

Election officials review each provisional ballot to determine whether all requirements are met and whether the vote can be counted. Some states treat provisional ballots cast by voters at the wrong precinct differently from provisional ballots issued for other reasons. Some states will count votes cast for all races the voter would have been eligible for, some only count statewide or federal races, and in others, a provisional ballot is not counted if it is cast in the wrong precinct.

10. What is “certification” all about – and who does it?

Election certification refers to the process of election officials attesting that the election tabulation and canvassing are complete and accurate and that the election results are a true and accurate accounting of all votes in a particular election. The timeline for local election officials to complete the certification process ranges from one day after the election in New Hampshire to 30 days after the election in West Virginia.

States vary in their methods of certifying election results after they complete the canvass. Many authorize local boards to perform that role. Others authorize a single state official, such as the Chief Election Official or Secretary of State. Many states also have state canvassing boards that are responsible for aggregating local results and certifying official results at the state level.

(Source: [EAC page on Certification](#))

Where to Go for Election Information

11. What do I need to know about the process of casting my ballot, and where can I get information on that process that I can trust?

The best source of election information is your own local election office. In most states, elections are run by the county government. To learn about your jurisdiction's specific voting technology, rules, procedures, and ballot content, look for that information from the county's local election office.

In addition, since all local offices are following state law, you can find information about voting in your state at:

State-specific Voter FAQs: <https://www.nass.org/initiatives/trustedinfo>