



# A GUIDE TO VOTING IN CALIFORNIA

## Why vote?

Elections are a critical element of our democracy. Casting a ballot can change the course of our nation, our state, and the communities we live in. Your vote helps elect presidents, our representatives in Congress, our state legislature, city council members, judges, and many others whose decisions have a direct impact on our daily life. Through the ballot box, you also have the power to help create new laws or repeal those you disagree with.

The right to vote has been hard-fought. Women, minorities, and non-landowners were all prohibited from voting earlier in our nation's history. In 1911, women gained the right to vote in California, nine years before women's suffrage was guaranteed in the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Just 50 years ago, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, landmark federal legislation designed to remove barriers to participation in the electoral process for African Americans, and later, other racial minorities. Our nation's veterans have also ensured that our democratic principles, including the right to vote, are protected.

By registering to vote and casting a ballot on Election Day, you have the power to strengthen our democracy. The California Secretary of State is committed to honoring the legacy of those who have so valiantly fought for our democracy by protecting your right to vote.

This guide describes many of the rights and responsibilities of voters and provides important information you need in order to vote and have your voice heard.



## Can I register to vote?

To register to vote in California, you must be:

- A United States citizen;
- A resident of California;
- 18 years of age or older on Election Day;
- Not currently in state or federal prison or on parole for the conviction of a felony; and
- Not currently found mentally incompetent to vote by a court of law.



## How do I register to vote?

You can visit [RegisterToVote.ca.gov](http://RegisterToVote.ca.gov) or call the Secretary of State's Voter Hotline at (800) 345-VOTE (8683).

Voter registration applications are provided at many places throughout the state:

- County elections offices or city halls
- Vote centers or satellite offices (where applicable)
- Public libraries
- Post offices
- Department of Motor Vehicles field offices
- State and county social services offices
- State and county mental health offices
- Department of Rehabilitation offices
- Independent Living Centers
- Department of Developmental Services Regional Centers
- Franchise Tax Board district offices
- Armed Forces recruitment offices

If you have a California identification card or driver license, you must provide the number on your voter registration application. If you do not have one of those two types of identification, provide the last four digits of your social security number. If you do not have a social security number, you will be assigned a unique identification number for voting purposes only.

## When do I register to vote?

While you may register to vote at any time, in most cases you must be registered to vote at least 15 days before an election day to be eligible to vote in that election. After that deadline has passed, you may conditionally register to vote. Contact your county elections official or visit [sos.ca.gov](https://sos.ca.gov) for more information.

You must re-register to vote if you move, change your name, or want to choose or change your political party preference. The easiest way to update your registration is online at [RegisterToVote.ca.gov](https://RegisterToVote.ca.gov).

## How do I choose my political party preference?

You may choose one of California's qualified political parties when you register to vote. Choosing a political party preference ensures that you can vote for that party's candidate in a presidential primary election.

You may also indicate on your voter registration application that you do not want to choose a political party, which means you will be registered as a No Party Preference (NPP) voter. In presidential primary elections, some political parties allow NPP voters to help choose their candidates. In all elections, NPP voters may vote for ballot measures and candidates running for voter-nominated, local, and nonpartisan offices.

## How do statewide primary and general elections work?

A primary election determines which candidates advance to a general election, held a few months later. State legislative, U.S. congressional, and state constitutional offices are known as voter-nominated offices. In a primary election, all candidates for these voter-nominated offices are listed on one ballot. Any voter may vote for any one candidate in each contest, regardless of party preference. The top-two candidates, regardless of party preference, who receive the most votes in each primary contest move on to the general election. After a top-two primary, a general election must be held even if one candidate receives a majority of the vote (at least 50 percent +1) and even if there is only one candidate in the primary election.

This top-two primary system does not apply to candidates running for U.S. President, county central committee, or local offices.

## Am I registered to vote?

To check your voter registration status, visit [voterstatus.sos.ca.gov](https://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov) or call your county elections office.

## Can I vote by mail?

Yes, any registered voter can vote by mail. You must request a vote-by-mail ballot from your county elections office at least seven days before an election day to be eligible to vote by mail in that election. Fill out the vote-by-mail ballot application in your county voter information guide, find one at [sos.ca.gov](https://sos.ca.gov), or contact your county elections office. You may also write out your request including your name and the address where you live, the address where you want to receive your vote-by-mail ballot, your signature, and the name and date of the election in which you want to vote by mail.

To find out if you have already applied to vote by mail, visit [voterstatus.sos.ca.gov](https://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov) or contact your county elections office.

To ensure it arrives by the deadline, vote-by-mail ballots can be returned either:

- **By mail:** Your voted ballot must be postmarked on or before Election Day and received by your county elections office no later than three days after Election Day.
- **In person:** You may deliver your voted ballot to your county elections office, a vote-by-mail ballot drop off location, vote center (where applicable), or any polling place within the state before 8:00 p.m. on Election Day.



02  
★

03  
★

## Can I sign up to permanently vote by mail?

Yes, any registered voter may ask to permanently vote by mail and automatically receive a mailed ballot for every election. You can cancel your permanent vote-by-mail status at any time. Your county elections official will only cancel your permanent vote-by-mail status upon your request or if you do not vote in four consecutive statewide general elections.

## How can I register and vote if I am a military or overseas voter?

### Registering to Vote:

Military or overseas voters may register to vote using any of the following methods: (1) the Secretary of State's online form at [RegisterToVote.ca.gov](http://RegisterToVote.ca.gov); (2) the Federal Voting Assistance Program's (FVAP) Online Assistant at [fvap.gov/california](http://fvap.gov/california); or (3) the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA), available at [fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/Forms/fpca2013.pdf](http://fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/Forms/fpca2013.pdf). County elections officials will accept FPCAs through the mail or fax.

### Requesting a Ballot:

Even if you are or were registered to vote in your county, in order to receive your election materials and vote when you are absent from your county while serving and/or living overseas, you need to apply for a vote-by-mail ballot by registering online at [RegisterToVote.ca.gov](http://RegisterToVote.ca.gov) or by completing the FPCA at [fvap.gov](http://fvap.gov), as detailed above.

### Returning a Voted Ballot:

Ballot return information, including method for submission of ballots, for each California county is listed on the Secretary of State's website at [sos.ca.gov/elections/voter-registration/military-overseas-voters/](http://sos.ca.gov/elections/voter-registration/military-overseas-voters/). Voted ballots may not be returned by email.

## How can I vote when I am away at college?

As a Californian living away from home while attending college, you have the option of registering to vote using your home address or your college address. When registering to vote, you are able to specify the address at which you wish to be registered and you can request a vote-by-mail ballot be mailed to you while attending college.

## How do I know what will be on my ballot?

### State Voter Information Guide:

Registered voters automatically receive the Secretary of State's Official Voter Information Guide in the mail a few weeks before Election Day. This nonpartisan guide has details about statewide ballot measures, some candidates, and voter rights.

The Secretary of State produces audio and large-print versions of the Official Voter Information Guide for voters who are blind or visually impaired. Guides are provided in 10 languages: English, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, and Vietnamese. To order any version of these guides free of charge, call the Secretary of State's Voter Hotline at (800) 345-VOTE (8683) or visit [sos.ca.gov](http://sos.ca.gov).

### County Voter Information Guide:

County elections officials mail a county voter information guide to each registered voter. This guide shows what your ballot will look like and includes information about local candidates, local ballot measures, your polling place address, an application for a vote-by-mail ballot, and more. The guide may also describe how voters with disabilities can vote privately and independently.



## How do I vote at a polling place?

### Finding Your Polling Place:

When you receive your county voter information guide in the mail prior to each election, your polling place will be listed on the back cover. If you do not receive your guide, contact your county elections office. You can also find your polling place by visiting [voterstatus.sos.ca.gov](http://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov), calling the Secretary of State's Voter Hotline at (800) 345-VOTE (8683), or texting the word "Vote" to GoVote (468-683).

### At Your Polling Place:

Polls are open in California from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. At your polling place, you will check in with a poll worker and they will explain the process of casting your ballot. The poll worker will give you a paper ballot, unique passcode, or computer memory card, depending on the voting system your county uses. If you are not familiar with how to mark a ballot or make a mistake on your ballot, ask a poll worker for instructions.

06



### At a Vote Center:

Some counties are using vote centers. Vote centers will be open up to 10 days before Election Day and are similar to polling places. For more information visit [sos.ca.gov](http://sos.ca.gov) or call your county elections office.

## What if I have a disability or need assistance to vote?

If you need assistance in marking your ballot, you may choose one or two people to help you as long as neither are your employer, your employer's agent, your labor union leader, or your labor union's agent.

### Voters with Disabilities:

State and federal laws require polling places and vote centers to be physically accessible to voters with disabilities. County elections officials inspect each site and often make temporary modifications to the sites for Election Day. Every person who works in a polling place or vote center is trained on election laws and the rights of voters with disabilities.

In addition, state and federal laws also require that all voters be able to cast their ballots privately and independently.

Each polling place or vote center must have one voting machine that allows voters, including those who are blind or visually impaired, to cast a ballot without assistance. The voting machine permits you to verify your vote choices and, if there is an error, allows you to correct those choices before submitting your final ballot.

If curbside voting is available, you may get as close as possible to the voting area and an elections official will bring the voting materials to you. Contact your county elections office to determine if curbside voting is available.

Some counties offer an accessible option called RAVBM (remote accessible vote-by-mail). RAVBM allows voters with disabilities to receive their ballots at home and mark them independently and privately before sending them back to elections officials. Contact your county elections official to see if this option is offered in your county.

### Language Assistance:

The Secretary of State and county elections offices offer a wide variety of election-related materials and assistance in languages covered under the federal Voting Rights Act. Covered languages may differ by county but can include: Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, Thai, and Vietnamese. Contact your county elections office for more information.

07



## Do I need to show identification when I vote?

In most cases, California voters are not required to show identification before they vote. If you are voting for the first time after registering by mail or online and did not provide your California identification number, driver license number, or the last four digits of your social security number on your registration application, you may be asked to show a form of identification when you go to the polls. Make sure you bring identification with you to the polls or include a copy of it with your vote-by-mail ballot. For a complete list of the acceptable forms of identification, contact your county elections office or read "Polling Place ID Requirements" at [sos.ca.gov/elections/additional-elections-information/help-america-vote-act/](https://sos.ca.gov/elections/additional-elections-information/help-america-vote-act/).

## What if my name is not on the list at the polling place?

If your name is not on the polling place list, you have the right to cast a provisional ballot. A provisional ballot is a regular ballot but is placed in a special envelope. The ballot will be counted after elections officials have confirmed that you are registered to vote in that county and have not already voted in that election. A poll worker can give you information about how to check whether your provisional ballot was counted and, if it was not counted, the reason why.

08  
★

## County Elections Offices

Alameda (510) 272-6933	Madera (559) 675-7720	San Luis Obispo (805) 781-5228
Alpine (530) 694-2281	Marin (415) 473-6456	San Mateo (650) 312-5222
Amador (209) 223-6465	Mariposa (209) 966-2007	Santa Barbara (805) 568-2200
Butte (530) 538-7761	Mendocino (707) 234-6819	Santa Clara (408) 299-8683
Calaveras (209) 754-6376	Merced (209) 385-7541	Santa Cruz (831) 454-2060
Colusa (530) 458-0500	Modoc (530) 233-6205	Shasta (530) 225-5730
Contra Costa (925) 335-7800	Mono (760) 932-5537	Sierra (530) 289-3295
Del Norte (707) 465-0383	Monterey (831) 796-1499	Siskiyou (530) 842-8084
El Dorado (530) 621-7480	Napa (707) 253-4321	Solano (707) 784-6675
Fresno (559) 600-8683	Nevada (530) 265-1298	Sonoma (707) 565-6800
Glenn (530) 934-6414	Orange (714) 567-7600	Stanislaus (209) 525-5200
Humboldt (707) 445-7481	Placer (530) 886-5650	Sutter (530) 822-7122
Imperial (442) 265-1060	Plumas (530) 283-6256	Tehama (530) 527-8190
Inyo (760) 878-0224	Riverside (951) 486-7200	Trinity (530) 623-1220
Kern (661) 868-3590	Sacramento (916) 875-6451	Tulare (559) 624-7300
Kings (559) 582-3211 ext. 4401	San Benito (831) 636-4016	Tuolumne (209) 533-5570
Lake (707) 263-2372	San Bernardino (909) 387-8300	Ventura (805) 654-2664
Lassen (530) 251-8217	San Diego (858) 565-5800	Yolo (530) 666-8133
Los Angeles (562) 466-1310	San Francisco (415) 554-4375	Yuba (530) 749-7855
	San Joaquin (209) 468-2885	

09  
★

For more information about voting and elections, call (800) 345-VOTE (8683) or visit [www.sos.ca.gov](http://www.sos.ca.gov).

TTY/TDD (800) 833-8683

To find your polling place, visit [voterstatus.sos.ca.gov](http://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov) or text the word "Vote" to [GoVote \(468-683\)](tel:468-683).

To find your voter registration information and other elections information related to you, visit [voterstatus.sos.ca.gov](http://voterstatus.sos.ca.gov)

The Secretary of State provides voter assistance in 10 languages:

**English** (800) 345-VOTE (8683)

中文 /**Chinese** (800) 339-2857

हिंदी /**Hindi** (888) 345-2692

日本語 /**Japanese** (800) 339-2865

ខ្មែរ /**Khmer** (888) 345-4917

한국어 /**Korean** (866) 575-1558

**Español/Spanish** (800) 232-VOTA (8682)

**Tagalog** (800) 339-2957

ภาษาไทย /**Thai** (855) 345-3933

Việt ngữ /**Vietnamese** (800) 339-8163



[RegisterToVote.ca.gov](http://RegisterToVote.ca.gov)

Follow the California Secretary of State on Twitter [@CASOSvote](https://twitter.com/CASOSvote) and like our page at [Facebook.com/CaliforniaSOS](https://Facebook.com/CaliforniaSOS)



California Secretary of State Alex Padilla  
[www.sos.ca.gov](http://www.sos.ca.gov)