

# How voting in the U.S. is harder than just checking a box

By Bloomberg Quick Takes, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.28.20

Word Count 788

Level 850L



A voting booth sits at a polling station in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 7, 2020. Photographer: Thomas Werner for Bloomberg

Elections are what make democracy work. Voting in the United States, though, can be difficult. The nation's founders restricted the vote to those who held property or paid taxes. That meant white men, at that time. Since then, constitutional amendments have guaranteed voting rights for black people and women.

However, many Americans do not vote because circumstances make it difficult. Most felons can't vote, and most people have to work on Election Day. People without proper identification might not have their vote counted. Some people want to allow voting by mail. But that idea is controversial, even during a pandemic.

## 1. How many Americans vote?

In 2016, there were 245.5 million voting-age Americans. Of them, 136.8 million voted in the presidential election. That figure represented 56% of voters, according to the Pew Research

Center. Among wealthy nations, the United States ranks near the bottom in voter turnout. About one-third of American adults are not registered to vote.

## **2. Why don't more Americans vote?**

Many reasons. One in four registered voters didn't vote in 2016 because they didn't like the candidates or campaign issues, Pew found. Others didn't think their vote would make a difference. Some said they were too busy. Certain states make it possible to register and vote on the same day. They also offer early voting and voting by mail. Other states, though, make voting more difficult. It is generally believed that when more people vote it helps Democrats because more people of color and low-income voters participate. However, it doesn't always turn out that way.

## **3. How do states limit voting?**

In some states, old laws made it hard for black people to vote. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed this. However, some lawmakers still try to make voting tough. In general, Republicans want state laws requiring voters to show official IDs. Republicans say this will stop election fraud. Democrats say voter fraud rarely happens. They say Republicans just want to reduce the number of Democratic voters. Some Democratic voters don't have official IDs. Also, some states remove voters from registration lists if they haven't voted in many years.

## **4. Why is this left to individual states to decide?**

The Constitution gives state legislatures power over voting in their state. But Congress has the power to change these rules. That's what it did with the Voting Rights Act. Part of that law required nine states to get legal approval before changing voting rules. In 2013, the Supreme Court threw out that requirement. That ruling let states make more restrictive voting laws.

## **5. How many states have done that?**

Since 2010, 25 states have passed stricter voting laws. They include restrictions on registration, less early voting and strict photo ID laws.

## **6. How do voter ID laws work?**

In states with the strictest laws, a voter must present official identification. It must have a photo on it. The most common form is a driver's license. Those without a photo ID may cast a ballot. But, for their vote to be counted, they may have to bring acceptable ID to an election office. For instance, supporters of these laws compare it to airport security. They argue that if you need to prove who you are to board a plane, you should have to do the same to vote. However, opponents of such laws say voter fraud on Election Day is very rare. They think Republicans just want to discourage voting. Poor people, especially, may not have an approved photo ID.

## **7. How is voter registration being targeted?**

States try to keep their registration rolls up to date. They do this by removing the names of people who have died, moved, or become ineligible to vote. Opponents claim it goes too far. They say it prevents some eligible people from voting.

## **8. How could voting be made easier?**

Some people tried to move Election Day to the weekend. That has failed. The same is true of making it a national holiday. (Much of the world holds elections on weekends. The United States does it on Tuesdays.) But 40 states now allow early voting. They may open polling places days or even weeks before the election. In more than half of those states, the early-voting period includes Saturdays or Sundays. Five states accept mail-in ballots for all elections. Others are loosening rules for absentee voting.

### **9. Why not allow voting online?**

Some U.S. states let military members and citizens living overseas vote online. Overall, though, the United States has resisted this move. The main fear is election security. Therefore paper ballots or paper receipts are required. These records can be double-checked if there are doubts about an election's outcome.