

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 **992**

Level **1220L**



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

Elections are a hallmark of democracy. Voting in the United States? That's complicated. The nation's founders restricted the vote to those who held property or paid taxes — white men, at that time. Even now, decades after constitutional amendments enfranchised black people and women, some states add obstacles to voting. Most felons can't vote, most people have to work on Election Day, people without proper identification might not have their vote counted, and letting voters send their ballots by mail is highly contested, even during a pandemic. Leaving office in 2017, former President Barack Obama described the United States as "the only country in the advanced world that makes it harder to vote rather than easier."

1. How many Americans vote?

There were 136.8 million ballots tallied in the 2016 presidential election. That figure represented 56% of the 245.5 million voting-age Americans, according to the Pew Research Center. That put the United States 26th out of 32 countries in voter participation among Organization for Economic

Cooperation and Development nations in their most recent national elections. A significant chunk of American adults, roughly one in three, weren't registered to vote in 2016.

2. Why don't more Americans vote?

Many reasons. For some, not voting is a statement of discontent with the system and the choices: 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 or said they were too busy. Some states make it easier to vote by allowing registration and voting on the same day, with ample early voting and balloting-by-mail opportunities; others make it more difficult with requirements that some voter-rights advocates argue are onerous. Conventional wisdom holds that high turnout favors Democrats because it means more people of color and low-income voters are participating. However, that doesn't always hold true.

3. How do states limit voting?

From the 1890s to the 1960s, some states let people vote only if they first paid a poll tax or passed a literacy test. In some places, a registered voter had to vouch for their good character. The common denominator was a desire to discourage black people from voting. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed these practices. These days, the fight is largely over state laws requiring voters to show proper ID and efforts to remove voters from registration rolls, if it's been a while since they voted.

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

The Constitution says state legislatures decide the "times, places and manner of holding elections for Senators and Representatives," a principle extended to voting for president. But Congress "may at any time by law make or alter such regulations." That's what it did with the Voting Rights Act. A key piece of that law required nine mostly Southern states, plus other places with a history of such practices, to get court or Justice Department approval for any proposed change in voting rules. In 2013, the Supreme Court threw out that requirement. That ruling opened the door to a wave of new state laws that voter advocates say are designed to limit turnout.

5. How many states have done that?

Since 2010, 25 states have enacted measures "making it harder to vote." They include restrictions on registration, cutbacks to early voting, and strict photo ID laws, according to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University.

6. How do voter ID laws work?

In the seven states with the strictest laws, a voter must present official identification with a photo on it. The most common form is a driver's license. Those lacking a photo ID may cast only a provisional ballot. For the vote to be counted, they must take additional steps after Election Day, such as bring acceptable ID to an election office. Advocates of such laws, who tend to be Republicans, say that if you need to prove who you are to board a plane, you should have to do the same to vote. Opponents of such laws say they discourage voting especially by poor people, who often don't have photo ID. They add that in-person voter impersonation on Election Day is exceedingly rare.

7. How is voter registration being targeted?

States keep their registration rolls accurate by periodically removing, or "purging," the names of people who have died, moved, or become ineligible to vote. But this practice has drawn legal challenges. Opponents claim it goes too far and prevents some eligible people from voting.

8. How could voting be made easier?

Periodic efforts to move Election Day to the weekend, or make it a holiday, have failed. (While much of the world holds elections on weekends, the United States does it on Tuesdays.) But 40 states now allow early voting, which means they start opening polling places days or even weeks before the election. In more than half of those states, the early-voting period includes at least one Saturday or Sunday, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Five states accept mail-in ballots for all elections, while many others are loosening rules for absentee voting by mail for November 2020 due to the pandemic. And many states now allow felons to to apply for restoration of their voting rights after they complete their sentence.

9. Why not allow voting online?

A dozen nations have experimented with online voting since 2000. However, only Estonia has fully adopted it. Some U.S. states let military personnel and citizens living overseas vote by web or app. Overall, though, the United States has moved in the opposite direction. States require paper ballots or paper receipts that could be audited in case of doubts over an election's outcome. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded in a 2018 study that "no known technology guarantees the secrecy, security, and verifiability of a marked ballot transmitted over the internet."