



**Keep it
Simple**

The Election Process Explained

By Monica Stone

Every four years, on the first Tuesday in November (following the first Monday), American citizens are given the opportunity to exercise the most fundamental guarantee of the Constitution of the United States—the right to cast a vote and elect their president. The election process begins with the declaration of candidates and ends when the new president is sworn in on inauguration day.

Who Can Run for President?

The basic rules are rather simple and can be found in the heart of the Constitution: the candidate must be an American citizen, at least 35 years old, and “been fourteen years a Resident within the United States.” If all three qualifications are met, anyone is technically eligible to run for the highest office in the land. But these days it takes millions upon millions of dollars and the backing of a political party to wage a successful campaign.

Who Can Vote? And How?

It is free to vote in the national presidential election, as long as the voter is a naturalized or native-born citizen of the United States, and at least 18 years old. Before an American citizen can cast a vote, they must register in the state in which they live.

The process of registering to vote varies state-to-state, but can usually be done by picking up a form at a local library, election commission, or motor vehicle office. Each state also varies as to how long before election day one must be registered to vote; in some states you can even register the same day you vote. Check your state’s website or contact the League of Women Voters for details on the voting laws in your state.

If you happen to be away at school, overseas in the armed forces, or on yearlong sabbatical studying giraffe habitats in Africa, you can request an absentee ballot. Again, check for your state’s rules on absentee ballots and request one well in advance of the election.



A Brief History of Voting Rights

In the early days of the country, white males over the age of 21 were the only citizens deemed worthy to vote for the country's leader. Most states even went as far as to give the privilege to property owners only, or to those who paid a levy beyond the annual tax. By the end of the Civil War, most of these restrictions went the way of the Whig Party, but African-Americans, women, and other minorities would still have to wait many decades before their rights were acknowledged and they joined their fellow citizens in the voting booth. The 15th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1870, gave African-Americans the right to vote, but most of the former Confederate states effectively took it away.

In the 1880s, the "Jim Crow" system of segregation was implemented throughout the South. There was a wide variety of institutional roadblocks put in place to keep African-Americans from exercising their right to vote. They included property ownership standards, literacy tests, and poll taxes, all of which were qualifications that few former slaves could meet. The "Jim Crow" laws were not repealed until Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led the fight for civil rights, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 allowed the federal government to ensure elections free of voter qualifications nationwide.



Women were given the right to vote in 1920, with the ratification of the 19th Amendment, but only after years of fighting by the suffrage movement.

The minimum voting age was lowered to 18 with the 26th Amendment, which was ratified in 1971, during the Vietnam War. This was due, in part, to many citizens who questioned why American teens could get shipped overseas to fight, but weren't given a say in who should have the power to wage war.

How Your Vote Gets Counted: The Electoral College

It is a common misconception that the United States is a pure democracy, but American voters do not directly elect the president of the United States. Rather, electors from each individual state nominally cast ballots for the president and vice-president in the electoral college.

Every state (and the District of Columbia) has a number of electoral college members equal to the number of representatives and senators in that state. There is a minimum of 3 members, in states such as Alaska and Montana, and a maximum of 54 members in California. Securing a majority of 270 electoral votes (out of a possible 538) ensures that the candidate will go on to the White House. Therefore, a candidate can actually become president by winning the electoral contest but losing the popular vote—which is what cost Grover Cleveland the 1888 election, and more recently resulted in George W. Bush becoming president in 2000.

The electoral college was originally created to keep the vote in the hands of the people and downplay partisan politics. Ironically, modern critics find the winner-take-all approach of the electoral college unfair because it takes the vote out of the hands of the people and may fail to reflect the popular national will by unfairly skewing the importance of individual votes in certain states.