



Primary Elections

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.

Throughout the late spring, summer, and into early fall, voters in [46 states](#) head to the polls to vote in state primary elections. The earliest primary held in 2026 was on March 3rd and the latest will be in mid-September. June and August are the busiest months for primaries. What is a primary election and how is it different from a general election?

In the United States, all citizens are [eligible to vote](#) in elections beginning at the age of 18. It is important to note however, that in some states, one may lose their voting rights if they are a convicted felon or have been declared mentally incompetent by a court. There are generally two types of elections that occur in the United States: A [primary election](#) and a [general election](#).

A primary election is one in which candidates for office seek the nomination of a [political party](#) for that office. As an example, before being elected governor of a state, a candidate first runs in their party primary election. When a candidate wins that election, they become the political party’s nominee for governor of that state. Just because a candidate wins in a primary election does not mean they automatically win the office for which they are running. Typically, other political parties will have candidates of their own running for the same office, so to determine which candidate is preferred by the voters, a general election is held. The origin of primary elections can be traced back to the early 1900s as the [progressive movement](#) aimed to take the power of candidate nomination from party leaders and give it to the people.



The manner in which party primary elections are conducted [varies widely by state](#). Primaries are typically [categorized](#) as either closed, partially closed, partially open, open to unaffiliated voters, open or top-two. In a [closed primary](#), only registered members of a political party may vote in that party's primary election. Independent or unaffiliated voters, by definition, are excluded from participating. In an [open primary](#), anyone can participate and voters may choose which party's ballot to vote, but this decision is private and does not register the voter with that party.

While 2026 is not a presidential election year, primary ballots will include legislative, congressional, gubernatorial and statewide office contests. In addition, some school board and judicial races are often decided in a primary election since they are nonpartisan, but if no candidate receives a majority of the vote, a run-off election typically occurs during the general election, or a different date determined by the state.

To Think and To Do: High voter turnout is essential to a healthy and functioning constitutional republic. However, voter turnout during primary elections is often very low. For [example](#), one of the first primary elections of 2026 was in Texas and had just 24% of its registered voters turnout. Despite this percentage, it actually smashed records for previous primary election turnouts. Conduct some research on your state's primary election laws. What type of primary does your state utilize? Compare voter turnout rates for the 2022 and 2024 elections. What do you notice? Brainstorm some ways in which you can raise awareness and encourage family and friends to participate in your state's primary election.

LEARN MORE:

- [National Conference of State Legislatures](#)
- [Ballotpedia](#)

