

Beyond Voting: Participating in Elections, Episode 1

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John Lewis, late civil-rights activist and member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia, stated: “The vote is precious. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democratic society, and we must use it.”

Although national elections often receive the most attention, the outcome of elections at the state level may determine a significant number of decisions about laws and regulations related to our Critical Concerns. Decisions at the state level will impact both the resources used and the regulations that affect the environment, the criminal justice system, the education systems, voting regulations, social services and many other issues. Decisions at a local town, city, or county level may determine zoning laws, school boards and the office of the police chief.

The first necessary step is to register to vote. Since some states have been purging their voter rolls, even those who think they are registered should check to make sure the registration is still valid. Generally checking your registration status should also give you other information about voting precincts, sample ballots, etc. This link will guide you to make sure your registration is still valid: [VOTE411](#) This site is sponsored by the League of Woman Voters and is non-partisan.

The second step is to become familiar with your state’s voter registration deadlines and requirements for voting. [VOTE411](#) will guide you to specific information for your state such as voter registration guidelines, requirements, and deadlines.

Please remember that state laws and regulations possibly have changed since the last election, so don’t rely on your memory from the last election.

A third step is to decide to deepen your engagement in the system of voting. You could be a poll worker, a poll observer, or a poll protector. Below are general descriptions of these roles, but the terminology may vary from state to state.

Poll workers sign up with their local Boards of Elections to work the polls. This may even be a paid position.

Poll observers inside the voting area are allowed in some states. The number inside a polling place is limited; rules for participation vary from state to state. Poll observers may be assigned through the political parties. This role is sometimes called partisan citizen observers. [Poll Watchers and Challengers \(ncsl.org\)](#)

Poll protectors are usually organized and trained through a state non-profit. A poll protector waits outside the polling place and watches for people who have had trouble voting. The poll protector is given a hotline phone number to volunteer lawyers trained in voting laws. The poll protector may also be reporting to a central number the length of the line, the ease of parking, etc. The poll protector is usually given a t-shirt and posters for identification. For more information: [Election Protection | Stop Voter Suppression & Protect the Vote!](#)

Many other volunteer opportunities are available, some that can be done from your living room. Non-profit organizations such as [Volunteer with VoteRiders or VoteForward](#). These organizations can link to activities such as postcard writing, text banking, phone banking, and door-to-door canvassing. These are efforts shown to increase voter participation.

Check with the local branch of Vote Riders to assist with driving people to get their voter IDs if that is needed or to go vote in person at the polls.

Another overlooked method of participation is attending your **County Board of Elections** meetings. These boards make decisions on where precinct polling places are located, the hours and places for early voting, and even on how many voting machines are located at each precinct. The media often report on voting precincts that have long lines and hours of wait time to vote. Rarely if ever are these long lines and wait times located in wealthy or middle-class white parts of town. Reducing the number of polling places in communities composed of mostly Black, Latine, and low-income citizens has been shown to reduce and suppress voting in these communities. This does not happen by accident. In a second article, other non-partisan ways to get involved in the political process of voting will be discussed.

Every election is determined by the people who show up. Susan B. Anthony, women's rights activist during the suffragette movement in the early 20th century, said: "Someone struggled for your right to vote. Use it." Elections are also decided by laws that suppress votes or by laws that encourage voting.