

Why We Vote

Political scientists often argue that statistically, the chance of one's vote determining the outcome of an election, especially in a larger election (like a vote for president or representative), is exceedingly small. Thus, one might argue that it is not worthwhile to vote, since it takes time and effort to research the candidates and issues, head to the polling place, and fill out a ballot.

So why do we vote? Why does it matter in a nation so large? There are a number of reasons, some political, some personal, and some social -- though most are a combination of these three.

The main reason is that it gives citizens a chance to make their voices heard. If most citizens declined to vote on a regular basis, elections would be much less meaningful as an expression of the will of the people. Citizens making their voices heard usually means choosing legislators who will pass laws they favor, or officials who will competently execute their job, whether that is leading a state (in the case of a governor), executing the laws (in states where one elects attorneys general) or other elected roles. Conversely, it means voting against officials who have demonstrated themselves unfit for their job, whether that means they are incompetent, violate the Constitution, or are corrupt.

Voting may also mean ratifying or rejecting amendments to one's state constitution. In addition, many states use direct election of judges, and others have initiative and referendums where citizens vote on legislation directly. Voting may also involve more local matters, including city, county, and school district elections. While the chances of one's vote being decisive is low in a national election, it can happen, especially in smaller and more local elections—there have been recent tie races in state legislatures decided by coin toss, for example. Similarly, there have been quite a few House races decided by a few votes, and perhaps most famously, in 2000, the presidential election came down to 537 votes in Florida.

Similar to the desire to achieve specific policy or legal goals, some people vote because it gives them a chance to express their political views or solidarity with or approval of a candidate or position. In other words, it is an act of self-expression, a message to those in office. They have a chance to make their voice heard because they believe that their vote can make a difference and that they can affect the world they live in. After all, politicians respond to those who vote – both because voters determine whether elected officials get to keep their jobs and because voting is the most conclusive measure of public opinion that a politician can consult.

Others, such as those from authoritarian countries, vote to celebrate their status as a free and equal citizen.

Conversely, many economists argue that the primary reason that many people vote is largely out of habit or to follow social norms.

While voting is a right, there is also responsibility involved. Educating yourself about the issues and candidates you vote on is an important part of voting.

VOTING AND THE CONSTITUTION

A specific right to vote is not mentioned in the Constitution, but Article I, Section II sets suffrage rules for the House as equivalent to state legislative elections, and a representative government is assumed in Article IV's guarantee of a "republican form of government." Moreover, there are several amendments that directly prohibit exclusion from voting: the 15th, 19th, 24th, and 26th to be exact. (The 14th Amendment also has a suffrage section, but it was largely superseded by the 15th).

The 15th Amendment:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

The 19th Amendment:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

The 24th Amendment:

The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.

The 26th Amendment:

The right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age.