



Americans have myriad opportunities to participate in politics: In addition to voting in local, state, and federal elections, they may contribute money to political campaigns or groups, volunteer to work for candidates or causes, write letters to their elected officials, and protest publicly if they disagree with the direction of government and politics.

Voting is by far the most common form of political participation, with about 60 percent of eligible voters casting ballots in the 2016 presidential race. The Constitution guarantees voting rights to those over 18, and prohibits restrictions on voting related to race, sex, or ability to pay taxes.<sup>1</sup>

The practical administration of voting occurs at the local level rather than the national level, with states and local governments establishing registration requirements, staffing polling places, and counting votes. The state office of **Secretary of State** typically oversees election activities. In most states, county governments are in charge of ground-level election mechanics.

Considerable variation exists in voting rules across states. In 17 states plus the District of Columbia, voters may register to vote on Election Day. Fully 35 states have laws requiring some form of identification in order to vote. And the vast majority of states restrict the voting rights of convicted felons. In recent years, states have allowed voters to cast ballots prior to Election Day, even if they will not be traveling or otherwise

engaged. Thirty-nine states now offer such options.<sup>2</sup>

Those wishing to contribute money to political campaigns and groups must abide by a series of federal laws enacted beginning in the 1970s. Current rules now allow Americans to donate up to \$2,800 to candidates for federal office in each election period (a primary election and a general election count as two elections, so the limit is \$5,600 per election cycle). By law, campaigns must disclose the names of contributors who give over \$200. People may also choose to give to political parties or groups, where the limits on contributions are higher.<sup>3</sup> Although the media coverage of candidate fundraising is extensive, only 14 percent of Americans say they contributed money to a political candidate, party, or group in 2016.<sup>4</sup>

Even fewer say they have participated in a “protest, rally, march, or demonstration”: only a bit more than 3 percent in 2016. A similar number report having worked for a political campaign or party.

Participation in politics generally increases with a person’s income, level of education, and interest in politics. Those who play an active role in social groups and voluntary associations also participate at higher rates.<sup>5</sup> Average rates of voter turnout are lower in the United States than elsewhere, but the number of times Americans are called upon to vote is greater than in most other countries.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment (18-year-old voting), the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (banning race discrimination in voting), the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment (banning sex discrimination in voting) and the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment (banning poll taxes).

<sup>2</sup> In only Maine and Vermont do felons never lose voting rights – even while incarcerated. Data on state election rules comes from the National Conference of State Legislatures, [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org).

<sup>3</sup> See the Federal Election Commission’s website for details: <https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/candidate-taking-receipts/contribution-limits/>.

<sup>4</sup> This figure and the “protest” and campaigning figures are calculated from the American National Election Studies, University of Michigan <https://electionstudies.org>.

<sup>5</sup> See Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Wattenberg, *Where Have All the Voters Gone?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).