



UTOPIA Washington Community General Election Voter Guide

What You'll Learn

How elections work in
Washington State

How to register to vote

What ballot measures are

Your rights as a voter

How Washington's vote-
by-mail system works

PREPARE THE VILLAGE
FOR ELECTION DAY
SUCCESS WITH THESE
HELPFUL TIPS.

YOUR VOICE. YOUR VOTE. YOUR COMMUNITY.

WELCOME

1

Talofa,

Welcome to The UTOPIA Washington Community Election Guide.

At UTOPIA Washington, we believe every community member deserves access to clear, accurate, and easy-to-understand information about the issues that affect our lives. One of those issues is voting.

For many people, elections can feel confusing. Government information is often filled with technical language, unfamiliar terms, and long explanations that can make it difficult to know where to begin. This can be especially true for first-time voters, multilingual households, immigrant families, young adults, and communities that have historically been left out of civic spaces.

That's why we created this guide.

Our goal is simple: to make elections easier to understand.

Inside these pages, you'll find plain-language explanations of how elections work in Washington State, what different elected officials do, how to complete and return your ballot, your rights as a voter, and where to go if you need help.

This guide is not about telling you who to vote for. It is about making sure you have the information you need to make informed decisions for yourself, your family, and your community.

Whether this is your first election or your fifteenth, we hope this guide becomes a trusted resource that you return to year after year and share with those around you.



Adrianna Suluai
Policy & Advocacy Director
UTOPIA Washington



Everly Faleafine
Policy & Advocacy Manager
UTOPIA Washington

How To Use This Guide

2

This guide is divided into learning guides. Each chapter focuses on a different part of the election process and includes:

- Did you know: Helpful election facts
- Community Corner: Practical tips and encouragement
- Key Terms: Plain language definitions
- Frequently Asked Questions: Answers to common questions
- Quick Checklist: Action steps to help you prepare
- Illustration and infographics: Visual guides to make learning easier

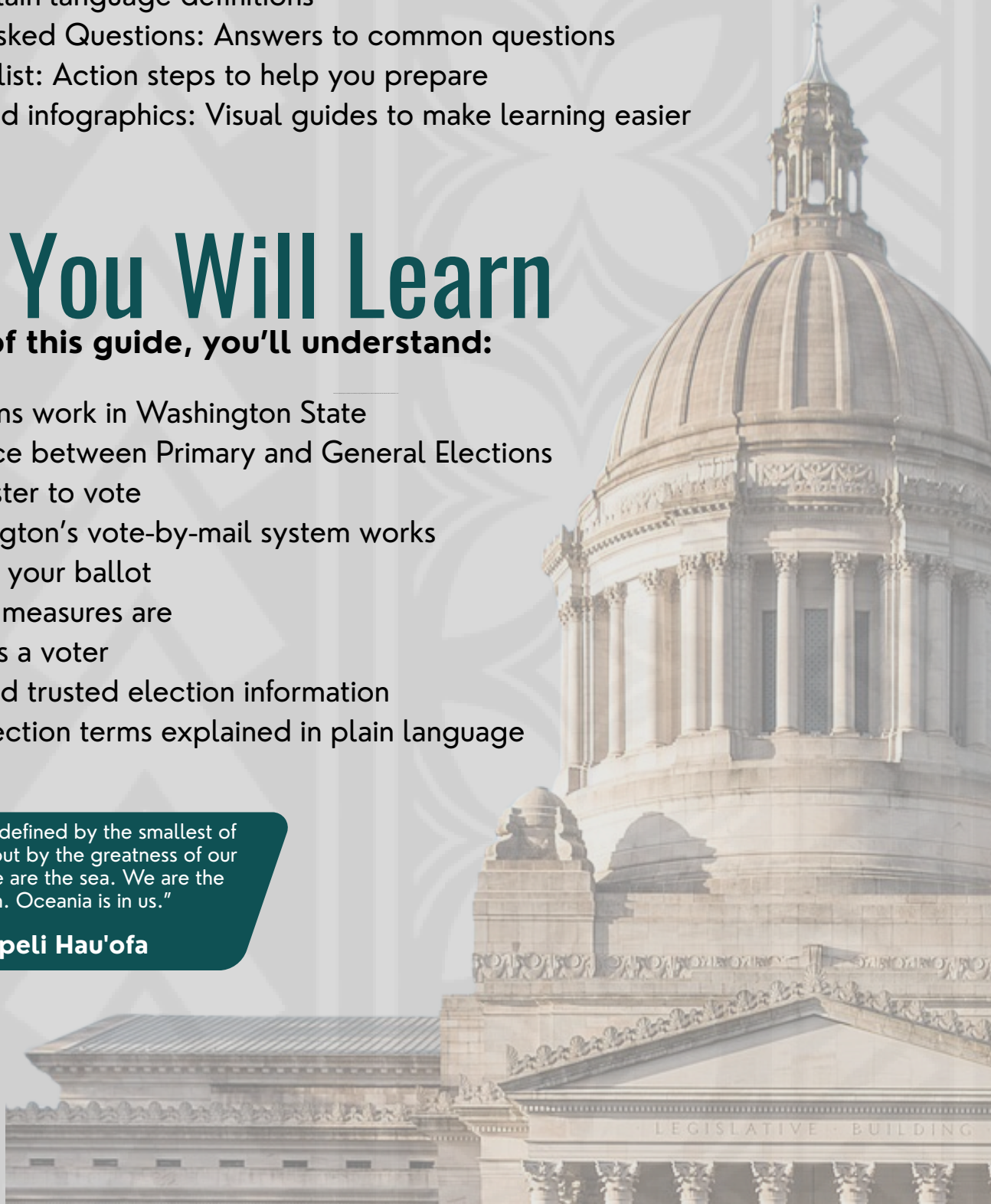
What You Will Learn

By the end of this guide, you'll understand:

1. How elections work in Washington State
2. The difference between Primary and General Elections
3. How to register to vote
4. How Washington's vote-by-mail system works
5. How to read your ballot
6. What ballot measures are
7. Your rights as a voter
8. Where to find trusted election information
9. Common election terms explained in plain language

"We are not defined by the smallest of our islands, but by the greatness of our oceans. We are the sea. We are the ocean. Oceania is in us."

-Epeli Hau'ofa



Find A Specific Topic

3

Chapter 1

Introduction

Chapter 2

Understanding Democracy & Why Voting Matters

Chapter 3

Understanding Government

Chapter 4

Understanding the Election Process

Chapter 5

Registering to Vote

Chapter 6

Primary Election vs General Election

Chapter 7

Understanding Your Ballot

Chapter 8

Understanding Ballot Measures

Chapter 9

Know Your Rights as a Voter

Chapter 10

Frequently Asked Voter Questions

Understanding Democracy & Why Voting Matters

Democracy is a system of government where people have a voice in how their communities, state, and country are governed. One of the ways people participate in a democracy is by voting.

Voting allows eligible community members to help choose leaders who make decisions about schools, transportation, health care, public safety, parks, housing, and many other issues that affect everyday life.

Democracy also includes volunteering, attending public meetings, serving on boards, organizing, and helping neighbors understand important issues.

Understanding Government



**Federal
Government**



**Washington
State
Government**



**Local
Government**



**City
Government**



**County
Government**



**Tribal
Government**



■ FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Makes decisions that affect the entire country.

Examples: national defense, immigration, Social Security, federal taxes.

■ WASHINGTON STATE GOVERNMENT

Makes decisions that affect everyone in Washington.

Examples: education, elections, transportation, public health, and natural resources.

■ LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Makes decisions closest to home.

Examples: roads, parks, libraries, emergency services, schools, housing, and local planning.

■ CITY GOVERNMENT

If you live in a city or town, you may vote for:

- Mayor
- City Council
- Municipal Court Judges (where its applicable)

These officials help make decisions about city services and local policies.

These officials help make decisions about city services and local policies.

CITY HALL

Understanding Government

COUNTY GOVERNMENT

County governments often provide services for everyone living in the county, including people who live outside city limits.

Common county offices may include:

- County Executive (in some counties)
- County Council or Commissioners
- County Assessor
- County Auditor
- County Prosecuting Attorney
- County Sheriff

The offices on your ballot depend on where you live

COMMUNITY CORNER

Understanding which level of government is responsible for different issues helps make your ballot easier to understand.

TRIBAL GOVERNMENT

Washington is also home to federally recognized Tribal Nations, each with its own sovereign government. Tribal governments serve their own citizens and communities and work alongside local, state and federal governments on many shared issues.

Learning about Tribal governments helps us better understand the rich history and governance of Washington state.



Understanding the Election Process

1 CANDIDATES FILE TO RUN

People who want to run for public office file the required paperwork during the official filing period. Election officials review the filings to make sure candidates meet the legal requirements.



2 BALLOTS ARE PREPARED

Election officials prepare ballots based on where voters live. Your ballot includes the candidates and issues for your specific voting districts. No two ballots are exactly alike.

3 BALLOTS ARE MAILED TO REGISTERED VOTERS

Registered voters receive their ballots by mail before Election Day. Inside the ballot packet you'll find:

- Your ballot
- Return envelope
- Voting instructions (Additional materials may vary)



4 LEARN ABOUT CANDIDATES AND BALLOT MEASURES

Take time to learn about the candidates and ballot measures. Read the Official Voters' Pamphlet and any local voters' pamphlet provided by your country.

5 COMPLETE YOUR BALLOT

Read each contest carefully. Follow the instructions on your ballot. Fill in the oval (next to) your choices.



6 SIGN YOUR RETURN ENVELOPE

Your signature is required. Election officials compare it to the signature in your voter registration record to help verify that the ballot came from you. Your signature is not connected to your voting choice.

7 RETURN YOUR BALLOT BY MAIL OR OFFICIAL DROP BOX ENVELOPE

You may return your ballot by: Mail or Office Ballot Drop Box. Your ballot must be received by the deadline to be counted.

8 BALLOT PROCESSING

- Officials verify the return envelope
- The ballot is processed according to Washington Law
- Ballots are prepared for counting while protecting voter privacy.

9 BALLOTS ARE COUNTED

After the required processing steps, ballots are counted. Because Washington votes by mail, counting continues as eligible ballots that were returned on time are processed. This is why results can change after Election Day.

10 ELECTION RESULTS ARE CERTIFIED

Once all eligible ballots have been processed and required post-election procedures are completed, election officials certify the results. Certification makes the election results official.

COMMUNITY CORNER

Take your time completing your ballot. You don't have to fill out the day it arrives in the mail.

DID YOU KNOW?

Election Night results are preliminary. Because Washington votes primarily by mail, eligible ballots returned on time continue to be processed before results are certified.

Registering to Vote

Voter registration helps election officials send you the correct ballot based on where you live. Keep your registration current if you move or change your name. Washington offers multiple ways for eligible voters to register, including online, by mail, and in person.

YOU MAY BE ABLE TO REGISTER TO VOTE IN WASHINGTON STATE IF YOU MEET ALL OF THESE REQUIREMENTS:

- **You are a United States citizen.**
- **You are a Washington state resident.**
- **You are 18 years old by Election Day.** (If you are 16 or 17 years old, you can sign up as a Future Voter so you'll be automatically registered when you become eligible)
- **You are not** currently serving a sentence of total confinement in prison for a Washington felony conviction or currently incarcerated for a federal or out-of-state felony conviction. People who have been released from prison may regain their voting rights and can register again if they meet other eligibility requirements.
- **You are not disqualified from voting by a court order.**



REGISTER BY MAIL

You can complete a voter registration form and mail it to your county elections office. Registration forms are available at many public locations, including:

Libraries, Schools and colleges, Government offices
Community organizations & County elections offices

Follow the instructions provided on the form and make sure you complete every item including what to do after you complete the form/ application.

Ways To Register

Washington offers several ways to register to vote. Choose the option that works best for you.

REGISTER ONLINE



If you are eligible, you can register online through Washington's official voter registration website. This is one of the quickest and easiest ways to register or update your voter information. You can also use online registration to:

1. Update your address
2. Change your name
3. Update your mailing address
4. Check your voter registration information

REGISTER IN PERSON



1. **Washington allows eligible voters to register in person through Election Day** at designated county elections offices and voting centers.
2. If you're unsure whether you missed a registration deadline, contact your county elections office to learn about your options.

COMMUNITY CORNER



Don't wait until the last minute. Review your voter registration whenever you move or your information changes.

KEY TERMS

9

Voter Registration: The process of signing up to vote.

Voting District: The area that determines which races appear on your ballot.

Quick Checklist:

Confirm your registration, verify your address, update your information as needed and watch for your ballot

CHAPTER 6

PRIMARY ELECTION

VS

GENERAL ELECTION

Its purpose is to narrow the field of candidates. The Primary Election helps decide which candidates move on to the General Election. In Washington State, voters can choose any candidate for each office on the ballot, regardless of the political party.

The two candidates who receive the most votes move on to the General Election, even if they belong to the same political party.

The General Election is the final election. This is when voters choose who will be elected to public office.

For many races, the General Election ballot includes the two candidates who advanced from the Primary Election. Some offices may appear only on the General Election ballot if they did not require a primary.

The candidate who receives the most votes in the General Election wins the office, unless a different rule applies to that specific election.



WASHINGTON STATE VOTER TIMELINE



July 17

Ballots Mailed

Voting begins statewide.
Every registered voter
receives a ballot.



July 27

Registration Deadline

Register or update your
voter registration online
or by mail



August 4

Primary Election

Vote by 8:00PM



August 21

Primary Results Certified

The top two candidates in
each race advance to the
General Election,
regardless of party.



October 16

**General Election
Ballots Mailed**

Voting begins statewide



October 26

Registration Deadline

Register or update your
voter registration online
or by mail



November 3

General Election

Vote by 8:00PM



MAKE YOUR PLAN. RETURN YOUR BALLOT. MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD.
Questions? Visit vote.wa.gov or contact your county clerks office

Understanding Your Ballot

By the end of this chapter, you'll understand:

- What a ballot is
- Why every ballot is different
- How to read each section of your ballot
- What different contests mean
- What ballot measures are
- How to avoid common mistakes

What is a Ballot?

A ballot is the official document used to cast your vote. It lists the candidates and ballot measures you can vote for during an election. Every registered voter receives a ballot based on where they live. **Your ballot may include one or more of the following:**

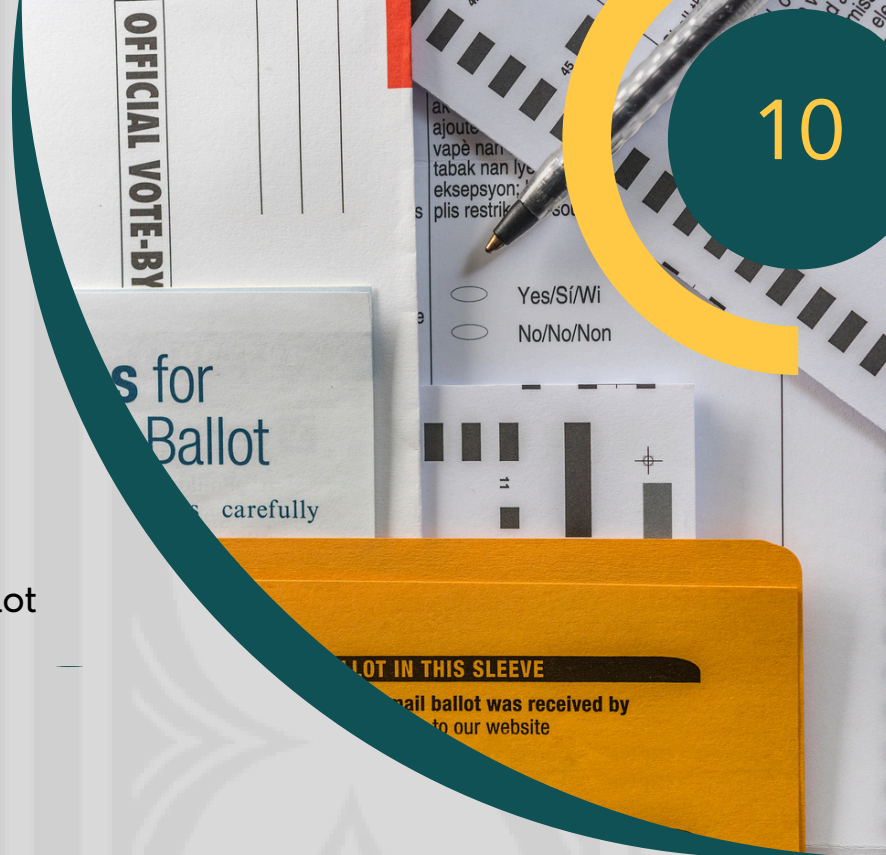
Federal Offices, State Offices, County Offices, City Offices, School District Offices, Special Purpose Districts, Special Ballot Measures

Why Doesn't Everyone Have the Same Ballot?

Your home address determines which districts you live in. Because every community has different elected offices and local measures, no two ballots are exactly alike. For example: A voter in Seattle may have different city races than a voter in Spokane. Someone living inside city limits may have different local offices than someone living in an unincorporated area.

COMMUNITY CORNER

Opening your ballot for the first time can feel overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. Every ballot is simply a guide to help you make your choices. Once you understand how its organized, voting becomes much easier.



What Is On My Ballot?

Your ballot is divided into sections (see below)

11

Candidate Races

There are elections where you choose between people running for public office.

Examples include: President, Governor, U.S. Senator, U.S. House of Representatives, State Representative, Mayor, School Board, County Council

Ballot Measures

Sometimes you won't vote for a person. Instead, you'll be asked to vote on a proposal or public question. There are called ballot measures. **They may involve topics such as:** Schools, Roads, Parks, Public Safety, Taxes, Local Funding & State Laws.

Judges

Some elections include judicial offices. Voters may choose judges for certain courts depending on the election and where they live.

School District Offices

School Board members help make decisions about: School policies, School District budgets and Educational priorities. Even if you don't have children in school, these offices may appear on your ballot.

Special Purpose District

You may also vote for offices such as: Fire District, Hospital District, Port District, Public Utility District and Water Districts. These organizations provide important community services.

Read each candidate's name carefully before making your choice, because some names may have the same first name with different last names, and others may be all be too similar in spelling so its gets easy to miss. Take time to read the description before voting on different measures.



COMMUNITY TIP

How to Mark Your Ballot

Always follow the instructions printed on your ballot. Read each contest carefully, and fill in the voting oval completely next to your choice. Avoid making marks that could make your ballot difficult to read. If you make a mistake, contact your county elections office to request a replacement ballot.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Forgetting to sign the return envelope
- Voting for too many candidates in one race
- Waiting until the last minute to return your ballot
- Guessing instead of taking time to learn about what's on your ballot.

Did You Know?

It's okay to leave a race blank if you don't feel informed enough to make a choice. Leaving one contest blank does not affect the rest of your ballot.

What is a Write In Candidate

A person whose name is writing on the ballot instead of selecting a printed candidate, when permitted by election rules.

BALLOT CHECK

Before returning your ballot, make sure you have

- Read each contest carefully
- Filled in your choices completely
- Reviewed your ballot
- Place your ballot in the return envelope
- Signed the return envelope
- Returned your ballot by the deadline

KEY TERMS:

Ballot: The official document used to vote.

Candidate: A person running for a public office.

Contest: A race or question that appears on your ballot.

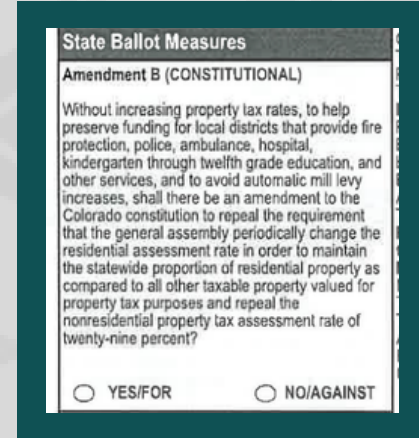
Ballot Measure: A proposal or question that voters decide directly.

Understanding Ballot Measures

Making Ballot Measures Easy to Understand

By the end of this chapter, you'll understand:

- What a ballot measure is
- The different types of ballot measures
- How to read ballot measures
- Common election terms used in ballot measures
- How to find trusted, nonpartisan information
- Questions to ask before voting



What is a Ballot Measure?

A ballot measure is a question placed on the ballot for voters to decide directly. Instead of choosing between candidates, you're voting YES or NO on a proposal. Ballot measures can address state or local issues, depending on the election.

Types of Ballot Measures:

INITIATIVE

A proposal placed on the ballot through a petition process that allows voters to decide whether it should become law.

REFERENDA

A measure that allows voters to approve or reject certain laws or actions as provided under Washington law.

LEVIES

A local property tax approved by voters to help fund specific community services for a limited period. Such as: EMS, Parks, Libraries etc

BONDS

A way for local governments or districts to borrow money for large projects, with repayment over time if approved by voters.

Some of the most important votes aren't for candidates, they're for ballot measures that can shape your community. Take time to understand each measure before you vote.



COMMUNITY TIP

How to Read a Ballot Measure

Before you vote, ask yourself these questions:

14

What is the proposal asking for? Summarize the proposal in one sentence.

What would change? Does the measure create, change, or repeat something.

Who would be affected? Think about which communities, services, or programs could be impacted.

Is there a cost or funding source? Some measures describe how a proposal would be funded.

What happens if it passes? The Official Voters' Pamphlet will explain the legal effect if the measure is approved.

What happens if it doesn't pass?

The ballot measure doesn't move on to the next phase of the process.



WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

Before voting, consider reviewing trusted, nonpartisan sources such as:

- Washington State Official Voters' Pamphlet
- Your County Local Voters' Pamphlet (if available)
- Public information provided by election officials
- Community education events that explain the election process without endorsing a position
- Reading information from multiple trusted sources can help you better understand what's on your ballot.

COMMUNITY CORNER

Many measures use legal language because they involve laws or government procedures. Taking little extra time to read the summary and trusted background information can make the proposal much easier to digest.

Know Your Rights as a Voter

Understanding Your Rights Before, During and After Voting

By the end of this guide, you'll understand:

- Your rights as a voter in Washington State
- Your right to vote privately
- Your right to receive assistance if needed
- Language access and accessibility options
- What to do if there's a problem with your ballot
- Where to trust help

COMMUNITY CORNER

Every eligible voter deserves to be treated with dignity, respect, and fairness. Knowing your rights can help you participate in elections with confidence and know where to turn if you need assistance.



Every Eligible Voter Has Rights

Washington State has laws and procedures that help protect eligible voters throughout the election process. These rights are designed to help ensure elections are fair, accessible, and secure.

Your Vote is Private

Your vote is your choice. No one should pressure you to vote a certain way or require you to share how you voted. Election officials protect the privacy of your ballot throughout the voting process.

You Have the Right to Ask for Help

If you need assistance because of a disability, language barrier, or another reason, help is available. Depending on your situation, you may be able to receive assistance from a person of your choice, except in limited circumstances established by law. If you're unsure, contact your county elections office for guidance.

Language Assistance

Understanding your ballot is important. Language assistance and translated election materials may be available in some counties and communities. If you need help understanding the voting process, contact your county elections office or a trusted community organization that provides nonpartisan voter education.

Accessible Voting

Every eligible voter should be able to participate. If you need accommodation because of a disability, accessible voting options are available. County elections offices can explain the services and equipment available to help you vote independently and privately.

Signature Verification

When you return your ballot, election officials compare the signature on your return envelope with the signature in your voter registration record. This helps confirm that the ballot was returned by the registered voter.

Your signature is not connected to your ballot choices.

If there's a question about your signature, your county elections office will generally contact you and explain how to resolve the issue before the applicable deadline.

If You Need a Replacement Ballot

If your ballot is: Lost, Damaged, Destroyed, Printed incorrectly, you can request a replacement ballot from your county elections office.

Protection from Intimidation

Every eligible voter has the right to participate without unlawful intimidation or threats. If you experience behavior that makes you feel unsafe or interferes with your ability to vote, report it to your county elections office or the appropriate election authorities.

Where to Get Help?

If you have questions or need assistance, contact: Your County Elections Office, Washington Secretary of State Elections Division, Trusted nonpartisan community organizations that provide voter education. Always use official or trusted sources when you have questions about the voting process.



COMMUNITY CORNER

IT'S OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP.

Whether you have questions about your ballot, need language assistance, or require accommodation, election officials and community organizations are there to help you participate with confidence.

Before you vote, remember:

Know Your Rights Checklist

1. My vote is private
2. I can ask questions if I need help
3. Assistance may be available if I have a disability or language barrier.
4. I can request a replacement ballot if needed
5. I know where to find trusted election information

17

CHAPTER 9

Frequently Asked Questions

Some of the commonly asked questions for voters.

Is this guide for first- time voters?

Yes! This guide was designed with first- time voters in mind, but it can also help anyone who wants to better understand Washington's election process.

Does this guide tell me who to vote for?

No. This guide is nonpartisan, meaning it does not support or oppose any candidate, political party, or ballot measure. Its purpose is to explain the election process and help make informed decisions.

Can I share this guide?

Absolutely. We encourage families, educators, community, organizations, and friends to share this guide with others.

What if I still have questions?

Contact your county elections office or visit the Washington Secretary of State's website for official election information. <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/voters/helpful-information/frequently-asked-questions-voting-mail>

Why does voting matter?

Voting is one-way people participate in shaping their communities by helping choose leaders and deciding public questions that affect everyday life.

Does one vote really matter?

Yes! Every election is decided by the total number of votes cast. Some elections are decided by only a few votes.

Frequently Asked Questions

Some of the commonly asked questions for voters.

18

Is voting the only way to participate?

No. People also contribute by volunteering, attending meetings, serving on advisory boards, organizing, and helping educate their communities.

Do I have to vote?

No. Voting is voluntary.

Why are there so many offices on my ballot?

Different elected officials are responsible for different parts of government.

Why doesn't everyone have the same ballot?

Your ballot depends on where you live

What if I don't know what an office does?

Use trusted, nonpartisan resources like the Official Voters' Pamphlet or your county elections office to learn more about the office and its responsibilities.

Do I have to vote in every race on my ballot?

No. You may leave races blank.

Why does Washington have a Primary Election?

The Primary Election narrows the field of candidates.

Why aren't election results final on Election Night?

Washington votes primarily by mail. Ballots returned on time continue to be processed after Election Day before results are certified.

Why doesn't every race appear on my Primary ballot?

Not every race office requires a primary.

How do I know if I'm registered to vote?

Check your registration through Washington's official voter registration system or contact your county elections office.

What if I recently moved?

Update your voter registration to make sure you receive the correct ballot.

Frequently Asked Questions

Some of the commonly asked questions for voters.

19

What if I changed my name?

Update your voter registration before the election.

Can college students register?

Yes.

Can military members register?

Yes.

Do I register before every election?

No.

What if I forgot to register?

Washington offers same-day in-person voter registration through Election Day for eligible voters.

Can someone help me register?

Yes.

Can I register if English isn't my first language?

Yes.

Can I register if I have a disability?

Yes.

What if I don't have a permanent address?

Your county elections office can explain registration options based on your situation.

What if my ballot never arrives?

Request a replacement ballot through your county elections office.

What if I lose my ballot?

Request a replacement ballot from the county elections office.

Can I use any pen?

Follow the instructions on your ballot. Dark ink is generally recommended unless otherwise instructed.

What if I make a mistake on my ballot?

Don't panic. Request a replacement ballot.

Frequently Asked Questions

Some of the commonly asked questions for voters.

20

Why do I have to sign my envelope?

Your signature helps verify your identity and confirm that you are the registered voter.

What if I forget to sign?

Your county elections office will generally contact you with information on how to resolve the issue before the deadline.

Can I track my ballot?

Yes. Washington provides ballot tracking options online and in your ballot instructions.

Do I need a stamp?

No. Washington ballots generally do not require postage.

What happens if I vote for too many candidates?

That contest may not count because it is considered an overvote.

Can I leave a race blank?

Yes.

Can I vote for a write-in candidate?

Some contests allow write-in candidates.

What if I damage my ballot?

Request a replacement ballot.

Do I have to vote on every measure?

No.

What if I don't recognize a candidate?

Research the candidate using trusted, nonpartisan resources.

Where can I find unbiased information?

Use the Official Voters' Pamphlet, your county elections office, and other trusted nonpartisan sources.

Can someone tell me who to vote for?

People may share their opinions, but your vote is your choice.

Can I skip questions?

Yes. You can leave any race or measure blank.

Frequently Asked Questions

Some of the commonly asked questions for voters.

21

Can I change my mind?

Before returning your ballot, contact your county elections office if you need guidance or a replacement ballot.

Can I erase a vote?

If you are unsure whether your ballot can still be read accurately, contact your county elections office about getting a replacement ballot.

Is my vote private?

Yes.

Can someone force me to vote a certain way?

No. You have the right to vote however you choose.

What if I need help because of a disability?

Accessible voting options are available.

What if someone interferes with my right to vote?

Report it to your county elections office or appropriate election authorities.

Can I bring someone to help me vote?

Many voters may receive assistance from a person of their choice, with some legal limitations.

Will someone judge me if I ask questions?

No. Election officials and community organizations are available to help answer questions.

How long does registration last?

Generally, once you are registered, you remain registered unless your information changes or an update is needed.

What if I don't have transportation?

Many registration tasks can be completed online or by mail if eligible. Community organizations may also offer assistance.

Can someone else return my ballot?

Washington law allows certain assistance with returning ballots in some circumstances. Contact your county elections office for guidance.

Frequently Asked Questions

Some of the commonly asked questions for voters.

22

Can I mail my ballot on Election Day?

Yes. Your ballot must be postmarked by Election Day.

Who counts my vote?

Trained election workers follow procedures established by Washington law to process and count ballots.

Can elections be audited?

Yes. Washington conducts post-election audits as part of its election process.

What is certification?

Certification is the official process of confirming election results after required procedures are completed.

I am turning 18 soon.

Washington's Future Voter Program allows eligible 16- and 17-year-olds to sign up early. If you meet legal requirements, you will be registered when you become eligible to vote.

I'm a college student.

You can register if you are eligible. If you are unsure which address to use, contact your county elections office for guidance.