



CHAPTER ONE

America Votes: The Big Picture

WHAT'S IN THIS CHAPTER

- Why you should vote
- The basics of voting in America
- What happens on election day
- What you'll be voting on

Should You Vote?

That's a good question. After all, lots of Americans don't bother to vote. They think it's a hassle, or they don't know how to do it, or they're afraid it would be hard to figure out who to vote for.

Truth is, those people are missing out on a great thing. Government at all levels has a big effect on our lives. Voting is a way to say what's important to you, and say it straight to the politicians and government officials. Voting gives you a feeling of being part of America and your community. It can even be fun.

And it's not hard to vote, especially with the information you've got in this booklet.

Choose or Lose

Most Americans know that the government can make a big difference in their lives – sometimes in ways they like, sometimes not. For example:

- If you're going to college or hope to go to college, government scholarship and loan programs can make the difference in whether you're able to afford school.
- The federal government steers the economy. That can affect whether jobs are easy to find or hard to find – whether we're having good times or hard times.
- If you have kids in public school, you probably want them to get a really good education. In that case, it's the local government or school district that runs the show.
- If you care about clean air or clean water or global warming, it's government at all levels that makes the rules that control pollution.
- If you have family in another country, and would like them to come to the U.S. to visit or immigrate, the federal government controls whether they get to come here or not.

“I'm a U.S. citizen, I'm part of this country, I'm helping to make it work and make the decisions.”

With so much depending on government, it truly makes sense for you – and your family and friends – to let the government know what you want it to do. And Election Day is the best time to do that.

That's when all the politicians are paying attention to you. From the president to the state governor to the local school board, they all want your vote. If they don't get enough votes, they won't get the job.

What's more, voting is one of the few times when all Americans are equal. We're not all rich, or beautiful, or friends of the mayor. But each of us has one vote.

Even if the person you vote for doesn't win, your vote still makes a difference, because it shows there was support for another point of view.

Not only that—politicians pay lots of attention to who votes and who doesn't. For example, because so many older Americans vote, politicians don't want to mess with Social Security, which is popular with older people. But young people and new U.S. citizens have not voted in high numbers in recent elections, so some politicians feel they don't have to pay too much attention to their needs. Of course, that needs to change.

Some people think there's no point in voting because all politicians are the same. But your choice of one politician over another does make a difference on issues that affect your lives. Here's just one example.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton signed a treaty (called the Kyoto Protocol) that tried to slow down global warming, which is a big environmental problem. In 2001, President George W. Bush pulled America out of that treaty. He said it was unfair to the U.S. and would be bad for the economy.

So you see, not all politicians are the same. You can voice your preference by voting.

Another thing: Did you notice that after the attacks of September 11, 2001, lots of Americans flew U.S. flags? They wanted to show they supported their country in a time of trouble.

In a way, voting is just like flying that flag. It says, "I'm a U.S. citizen, I'm part of this country, I'm helping to make it work and make the decisions."

Besides, how many times have you heard people complain about the government, and what it's doing or not doing? Everyone has a right to complain — it's called freedom of speech. But if you didn't vote, you really can't complain, can you?

DOES ONE VOTE COUNT?

In 1999, Leslie Byrne was elected to the Virginia Senate by 37 votes, less than 1 vote per precinct (voting district). John F. Kennedy's margin of victory over Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential race was less than one vote per precinct. One vote per precinct passed women's right to vote in California in 1911. ★

It's also pretty easy to vote. If it's hard for you to get away from home or work, you can register and vote by mail. We'll explain how later in this booklet.

Like the ad says, Just Do It! For yourself, your family, your country — Vote!

The All-American Basics

Most of the important rules about voting are the same all across the USA.

- You have to be a U.S. citizen 18 or older on Election Day to vote in federal elections.
- Voting is private. When you go to a polling place (usually in a local building like a school or a firehouse), you make your choice by yourself. No one can stand over you and tell you who to vote for. No one can see who you vote for.
- Voting is voluntary. You don't have to vote, ever. And, there are no penalties or fines for not voting.
- If anybody tries to stop you from voting, they are breaking the law.
- It doesn't cost anything to register or to vote.
- You are free to vote however you want. For instance, if one Election Day you want to vote for some Republicans and some Democrats and some candidates from another party, you can do that.
- You can vote only once on any Election Day.

There are some differences from state to state. Even within a state, you'll find differences – for example, different voting machines. That's because in most cases, elections are actually run by county, city or township governments.

Election Day

When people talk about “Election Day,” they often mean the days when federal elections take place — for president and vice president of the United States and the U.S. Congress. These are called general elections. They are held in November of even-numbered years like 2004, 2006 and 2008. They are held on the Tuesday that comes between November 2 and November 8.

However, there are other elections too. In fact, most states have elections every year. The U.S. has federal, state and local governments, and they can all hold elections on different days. They usually try not to have too many different Election Days.

Many states have primary elections, where voters choose a candidate from a certain party. Then the winner of the primary goes on to run against candidates of other parties in a general election. Primaries are usually held a few months before the November general election.

Say there is a race for president. There may be several people who want to be the Democratic candidate for president and several people who want to be the Republican candidate for president. In 2000, for example, John McCain and George W. Bush competed in a number of Republican primaries. Ultimately, George Bush became the Republican candidate for president.

In some states you have to be a registered Republican to vote in a Republican primary or a registered Democrat to vote in the Democratic primary.

In the general election, the winner of the Democratic primary will very often compete against the winner of the Republican primary as well as candidates from other parties.

In a few places, if the winner of an election does not get enough votes, there will be a *runoff election*, in which the top two vote-getters run against each other.

In some places, people get time off from work or school to vote.

If it's hard for you to vote in person on Election Day, you can get an *absentee or mail-in ballot*. That's a paper ballot which you fill out at home and mail in by Election Day.

What You'll Be Voting On

Since we have federal, state and local levels of government in the U.S., it's common on Election Day to have many different contests to vote on. You may be asked to vote for president, governor, county council and school board, for example.

THE FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE

In the early days of the United States, not all Americans had the right to vote. In fact, many people had to work hard – even go to jail or risk their lives – to win that right.

African Americans were officially given the right to vote at the end of the Civil War in 1865. But in reality, many were not allowed to vote, especially in the South. Black people who tried to vote were sometimes fired from their jobs, beaten, or even killed. It was only with the civil rights movement of the 1960s that African Americans really gained the right to vote everywhere in the U.S.

American women struggled for decades before they won the right to vote nationwide in 1920.

Even in recent years, people with disabilities or people with limited English skills have often found it hard to vote, though federal law now tries to make sure they can exercise their right to vote.

It's easy to take for granted that we have the right to vote. But it's worth remembering that it is a precious right that people have struggled for and won over many years. ★

If it seems like too much to figure out, just vote on as many races as you feel comfortable with.

Most often, there will be two or more candidates, usually supported by different political parties, running for one position. You can vote for the candidate you think is best.

Sometimes, there will be several openings in one contest: there could be eight candidates running for three seats on the county council. Usually in a case like that, you'll be asked to vote for your three top choices. Then the top three vote-getters win.

Sometimes you'll be asked to vote on things other than candidates. Maybe there's a law that the people are being asked to vote on (often called a ballot measure) or an amendment to the state constitution. Often people are asked to vote on money matters, like a tax increase or a bond issue.

Ballot measures may be complicated, but some state and local governments, and groups like the League of Women Voters, write up explanations that are easy to understand. If you have problems understanding a ballot measure, you can call your local election office or the League in your state and find out if there is another, easier explanation they can send you or that you can read on the Web.

**Like the ad says, Just Do It!
For yourself, your family, your
country – Vote!**



Voting in America: A Work in Progress

Voting in the United States is central to our democratic way of life. But the process of voting is not perfect. For example, you may remember that in the presidential election of 2000 there was lots of confusion and disagreement, especially about the vote in Florida.

Over the years, there have been changes in the voting process. In 1993, Congress passed the so-called Motor Voter Law, so people can register to vote whenever they get a driver's license. Oregon now has elections that are 100 percent mail-in, and they're getting more people to vote that way. The U.S. armed forces are still experimenting with allowing Americans overseas to vote over the Internet.

The point is, elections in America are a work in progress. That's why organizations like the League of Women Voters keep working to make it easier to vote and to make sure elections are fair and accurate. In 2002, Congress passed an important law – the Help America Vote Act – to try to make sure that every eligible voter gets to vote, and that votes are accurately counted. States are working now to improve their voting systems.

While there are some federal rules about voting, the laws on voting vary a lot from state to state. For more information on how to register and vote where you live, you can contact the League of Women Voters in your state (see page 46). ★