

# FIRST VOTE

**A GUIDE FOR NEW VOTERS  
IN NEW YORK STATE**



Written and distributed by  
the League of Women Voters® of New York State

# VOTING BASICS

Where can I get information about voting?  
Consult or contact the following:

## **New York State Board of Elections**

[www.elections.ny.gov](http://www.elections.ny.gov)  
[info@elections.ny.gov](mailto:info@elections.ny.gov)  
1-800-367-8683

## **Your local county Board of Elections**

<http://www.elections.ny.gov/CountyBoards.html>

## **New York City Board of Elections**

[vote.nyc.ny.us](http://vote.nyc.ny.us)  
1-866-868-3692

## **League of Women Voters of New York State**

[www.lwvny.org](http://www.lwvny.org)  
[lwvny@lwvny.org](mailto:lwvny@lwvny.org)  
(518)465-4162

## **Your local League of Women Voters**

<http://www.lwvny.org/LLresources/LLcontacts.html>

## **Vote 411 Electronic Voter Guide**

Info on the races and candidates specific for your address.  
[www.vote411.org](http://www.vote411.org)

You can also contact political parties, newspapers, candidates and civic organizations, and consult their websites.

## **AM I ELIGIBLE TO VOTE IN NEW YORK STATE?**

In order to vote, you must:

- be a United States citizen
- be 18 years old by December 31 of the year in which you file the Voter Registration Form (note: you must be 18 years old by the date of the general, primary or other election in which you want to vote)
- live at your present address at least 30 days before an election
- not be in prison or on parole for a felony conviction
- not be adjudged mentally incompetent by a court
- not claim the right to vote elsewhere in the country, and
- register by filing a New York State (NYS) Voter Registration Form.

## Where can I find a NYS Voter Registration Form?

Forms can be found online at the NYS Board of Elections website and the League of Women Voters of NYS website in both English and Spanish. The New York City Board of Elections website also has Voter Registration Forms in Chinese and Korean. Many county Board of Elections websites also have forms. See the information at the beginning of this document for the website addresses. You can also get a paper form by calling or visiting any Board of Elections, or filling out an online request on the Board of Elections website.

NYS government agencies also have paper Voter Registration Forms. You can get a paper form, fill it out and file it in person when applying for services or assistance at the following NYS government agencies:

- Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services
- City Universities of New York (CUNY)
- Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
- Commission on Quality of Care and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities
- Department of Health – WIC Program
- Department of Labor
- Department of Motor Vehicles
- Department of Social Services
- Department of State
- Division of Veterans’ Affairs
- Military Recruiting Offices
- Office for the Aging
- Office of Mental Health
- Office For People With Developmental Disabilities
- State Universities of New York (SUNY)
- Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities
- Workers’ Compensation Board.

When you apply for a NYS Drivers License or Non-Driver ID Card through the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), you can fill out the Voter Registration section of the form to apply for voter registration or to notify the Board of Elections of a change of address. DMV will forward your information to the Board of Elections.

If you have a driver’s license, permit or Non-drive ID, you can register to vote online and/or update the information you have on file with the New York State Board of Elections. Updated information could include providing your County Board of Elections with your new name, new address, or changing a party enrollment. This can be done at My DMV, <http://dmv.ny.gov/more-info/electronic-voter-registration-application>.

Voter Registration Forms are also available at town and city halls, post offices and public libraries, and from the League of Women Voters (see the contact information above).

## When do I need to file a Voter Registration Form?

You must file a new form if you are registering to vote for the first time in New York State, if you change your address or want to change your party affiliation. Otherwise your registration is permanent.

## Where do I file the Voter Registration Form and when is it due?

You can file your completed form by mailing it to your county Board of Elections. The address is on the form. It must be postmarked at least 25 days before the election.

You can also file the form in person at your county Board of Elections or at any of the NYS government agencies listed above on any business day of the year, but you must file it at least 25 days before the election.

## What are the identification requirements necessary for voter registration?

The Voter Registration Form asks for the ID number on your current NYS Driver's License or Non-Driver Photo ID, or the last four digits of your Social Security Number. The Board of Elections will use this ID number to check your identity. If you do not have either of these numbers, you may use a valid photo ID, a current utility bill, bank statement, paycheck, government check or some other government document that shows your name and address. If the Board of Election is unable to verify your identity before election day, you will be asked for identification when you vote for the first time.

## How do I know that I have successfully registered?

If you are registered, your county Board of Elections will mail a special postcard to you prior to the election of every year stating that you are registered and telling you where to vote (your polling place). If you are registering for the first time, you should receive a card within 4 to 6 weeks after submitting your application. The card will confirm your registration or ask you for missing information. If you don't get this card, call your Board of Elections to see if your application was processed. You can also use the online facility at the NYS Board of Elections website to see if you are registered and to determine your polling place.

## Can I register to vote before I turn 18 years old?

You may register when you are 17, but you must be 18 by December 31st of the year in which you file the Voter Registration Form. You must be 18 by the date of the general, primary or other election in which you want to vote.

## After I have registered for the first time, what if I move within my county or within the city of New York? Do I need to file a new Voter Registration Form?

Yes. You should update your information by completing a new Voter Registration Form or going to My DMV and updating your information on that website (see section above on My DMV).

## ELIGIBILITY QUESTIONS

### **Do I have to choose a political party when I register to vote?**

No, it is your choice. If you choose not to register with a political party, simply mark the box on the form that says “I do not wish to enroll in a party.” You may change your party enrollment or newly enroll in a party at a later time by filing another Voter Registration Form. Changes in party enrollment take effect a week after the general election of the year when the change was requested.

### **Is there any benefit to joining a political party when I register to vote?**

Yes. Declaring a party allows you to vote in that party’s primary election, which in New York State is open only to party members. Also, only enrolled party members can sign nominating petitions, which are circulated by candidates seeking to have their names placed on the election ballot. You do not have to vote for your party’s candidates in the general election. You may vote for any candidate from any party.

### **What is a primary election?**

A primary is an election that takes place within each of the political parties before the general election. When two or more members of one political party wish to run for the same position (State Senator, for example), the votes of party members in the primary will decide which will be the party’s candidate in the general election. If there is only one candidate running from a party, there is no primary.

### **I am on parole from prison for a felony conviction. Can I vote?**

No. Individuals in jail, prison, or on parole for a felony conviction cannot vote. Once parole is completed, you will be eligible to vote but you must re-register by completing a new Voter Registration Form or going online to My DMV.

### **I am in jail awaiting trial or grand jury action. Can I still vote?**

Yes. You are eligible to vote: if you are currently in jail awaiting grand jury action, trial or disposition of a case but not yet convicted of a felony; if you are convicted of a misdemeanor, not a felony; and if you are convicted of a felony but do not receive a sentence of imprisonment.

If you are in jail and eligible to vote, you should register to vote in the county of your permanent address. List the jail or prison address as the place where you receive your mail temporarily.

### **I am eligible to vote, but since I am in jail I will not be able to go to the polling place to vote. What should I do?**

You may vote by absentee ballot. There is a check box related to imprisonment on the absentee ballot application in the section where you state the reason for your needing to vote by absentee ballot. Write the jail or prison address as the location where the ballot should be mailed.

### **I’m homeless. Can I vote?**

Yes, you can register to vote if you meet the other requirements. You should list the location – park, shelter, etc. – where you regularly stay as your place of residence, and provide a mailing address so that notifications from the Board of Elections can be mailed to you. You will receive a postcard from the Board of Elections at the address you list that will tell you where to vote. You will need to provide some kind of identification as described above.

### **Will I be called for jury duty if I register to vote?**

Jury duty lists are selected randomly from licensed drivers, state taxpayers, social services recipients, and registered voters. You have just as much chance to be selected as a juror if you drive as you do if you are a registered voter.

# VOTING PROCEDURES

## What do I need when I go to vote?

You must be registered. If you registered by mail or online, you will be asked for identification the first time you vote.

Acceptable forms of ID include a driver's license or current photo ID, or a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, or other government document that shows your name and address.

## How do I find out what I am voting for before I get my ballot?

It is wise to know who and what will be on the ballot before you go to your polling place. Many newspapers and the League of Women Voters publish voters guides before elections listing the candidates and their background information. Your Board of Elections website often provides information on what offices are to be filled and who the candidates are. The website, Vote 411 ([vote411.org](http://vote411.org)) provides information on the races and candidates specific to

your address. When you enter your polling place, look for a sample ballot listing the candidates and their party affiliations, the offices they are seeking, and any questions placed before the voters.

## What are referendum questions, ballot issues and propositions?

These are proposals by local or state legislatures that are voted on by registered voters. For example, they may propose an amendment to the State Constitution or ask for approval for the borrowing of money for a specific purpose such as a highway. They require a "yes" or "no" answer, and can be easy to miss. Remember to look for them on the back of your ballot.

## What are "Write-ins"?

Any person's name that is not listed on the ballot can be written in by the voter for any office. You write in the name of the candidate of your choice on the line of the ballot that says "WRITE IN."

## WHO IS ELECTED WHEN

### When are elections held?

Primary elections in New York State are usually held on the first Tuesday after the second Monday in September. Polls are open from 12 noon to 9pm except in the city of New York and the counties of Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester, Rockland, Orange, Putnam and Erie, where they are open from 6am until 9pm.

General elections are held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Polling places are open from 6am until 9pm.

Voting on school budgets and the election of school board members

usually occurs on the same day in May throughout New York State. Most village elections are held in the spring. Check with your county Board of Elections for the dates and polling times for these elections.

### How do candidates get on the ballot?

Most candidates get on the ballot by filing a petition containing a specified number of signatures of members of their political party, as required by the New York State Election Law. Some political parties designate particular candidates at their conventions.

## How do I vote?

When you enter the polling place, sign in with one of the poll workers. If you have any questions at any point in the process, be sure to ask a poll worker; they are there to help you. New York State voters use paper ballots and optical scanning equipment. The poll worker will give you a ballot and a privacy cover for your ballot so that you can keep your vote secret. You will be directed to a booth to mark your ballot in private. Make sure to mark the ballot according to the directions. You will then take your ballot to the scanner and feed it in. The scanner counts your vote and your paper ballot is securely saved in case a recount is needed. No one will know how you vote.

## What if my name is not on the rolls?

If you believe that you were assigned to vote at that polling place and election district, check with a poll worker to make sure that you are in the right place. If you are, ask to

vote by “affidavit” ballot; you have a right to do so. After the election, the Board of Elections will check its records and your affidavit ballot will be counted if you were at the correct polling place. Your county Board of Elections must notify you as to whether or not your vote was counted. If you find out that you are in the wrong polling place, ask the poll worker to help you find out where your correct polling place is.

## Suppose I need help or am disabled in some way?

If you have any questions about the voting procedure, ask the poll workers to help you. They are prepared to show you how to use the voting machine. You are permitted to bring a friend or relative with you to help you vote, but not your employer or union representative. Each polling place has a special machine for disabled individuals – the blind or visually impaired for example – that will allow them to vote privately using special equipment. Ask for help to use this equipment.

## Are some elected offices voted on during even-numbered years and others during odd-numbered years?

Yes. In every even-numbered year, New York State citizens elect the following to two-year terms:

- all members of the U.S. House of Representatives who represent us in Washington, D.C., and
- all members of the New York State Assembly and Senate who represent us in Albany.

In every other even-numbered year, every four years, ballots are cast for President and Vice President of the United States.

In even-numbered non-presidential-election years, every four years, New York State citizens elect the following state officials:

- Governor and Lieutenant Governor
- Comptroller
- Attorney General.

U.S. Senators, who represent New York State in Washington D.C., are elected to 6-year terms in some even-numbered years. One third of the U.S. Senate runs for election on any given even-numbered year.

In all odd-numbered years, ballots are cast for local town, county and city offices as prescribed by their charters.

# ABSENTEE VOTING

## Can I vote if I won't be home on Election Day?

Yes. Any qualified registered voter may vote by absentee ballot if unable to vote in person due to any of the following reasons:

- absence from county or New York City on election day
- temporary illness or physical disability
- permanent illness or physical disability
- duties related to primary care of one or more individuals who are ill or physically disabled
- being a patient or inmate in a Veterans' Administration Hospital
- detention in jail/prison, awaiting trial, awaiting action by a grand jury, or in prison for a conviction of a crime or offense that was not a felony.

An application for an absentee ballot must be filled out and submitted to the Board of Elections by mail no later than 7 days before Election Day, or in person until the day before Election Day. The Board of Elections will mail or give you your actual ballot to you. Fill the ballot out, and mail it by the day before the election, or hand deliver it before or on Election Day.

## What if I join the military and am sent away from home or overseas?

There are special procedures that make it easier for members of the armed forces and their families stationed away from home to vote. Every base has a voting officer who has information explaining the voting requirements for each state. Military and overseas voters are eligible to apply for and

receive their ballots electronically. Ask your voting officer for assistance, or check the government's web pages for information.

## If I am disabled, must I vote by absentee ballot?

No. Most polling places are now accessible to the disabled or are becoming accessible, and all must have ballot marking devices for use by disabled individuals. If yours is not accessible, you may ask your Board of Elections to have your records transferred to a nearby accessible polling place where the ballot will be the same as in your election district. This request must be made well in advance of the election; check with your Board of Elections.

You may also vote by absentee ballot. If you have a long-term illness or disability, you can apply for a permanent absentee ballot and you will automatically receive your ballot before each primary and general election.

## When I am in college out-of-town, how do I decide where to vote?

When you are attending college at a school outside your hometown, you may vote in person or by absentee ballot in your home community. You must be registered in your hometown district to vote there.

Many states, such as New York, allow college students to register and vote where they attend college, and you may wish to do so if you consider that community your primary residence. Check with the town or city clerk or the county Board of Elections in your college community to find out if you may vote from your college address. You may only vote in one location.

**Please Join Us** Membership is open to women and men. There are over 50 local Leagues across NY state. Joining at any level automatically confers membership at every level: local, state and national. Membership enables you to support the League and receive publications from all three levels, and provides the opportunity to be involved in local, state and national issues. **Visit [www.lwvny.org](http://www.lwvny.org) and click on JOIN LWWNYS.**  
**To find a local League in your area, click on FIND A LOCAL LEAGUE.**