

THE
CITIZENS'
HANDBOOK

**AN IOWAN'S GUIDE TO
BEING A GOOD CITIZEN**

***OUR LIBERTIES WE PRIZE
AND OUR RIGHTS
WE WILL MAINTAIN***

THE IOWA MOTTO

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THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF IOWA

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The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization working to protect and expand voting rights and ensure everyone is represented in our democracy. We empower voters and defend democracy through advocacy, education, and litigation, at the local, state, and national levels.

PROJECT ORIGINS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This Citizens' Handbook for Iowa was made possible through the collaborative efforts of multiple League organizations and the generous support of the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF).

Foundation Work: The League of Women Voters of Indiana (LWVIN) developed the original Citizens' Handbook concept and content for the state of Indiana, prepared pursuant to a League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF) Making Democracy Work grant, received by the League of Women Voters of Indiana and completed in 2024. Their groundbreaking work created an accessible, comprehensive resource to help citizens understand and participate in their government.

Iowa Adaptation: Inspired by Indiana's success, the League of Women Voters of Ames and Story County (LWV-ASC) contacted LWVIN to request permission to adapt their excellent handbook for Iowa citizens. LWVIN generously agreed, asking only that their pioneering work be acknowledged.

Development: Under the direction of the LWV-ASC, this Iowa handbook was developed and closely patterned after LWVIN's original model, with content adapted to reflect Iowa's unique governmental structures, political processes, and civic participation opportunities. We are deeply grateful to LWVIN for their vision, generosity, and willingness to share their work so that Iowa citizens can benefit from this vital civic education resource.

Funding: This project was made possible by a Making Democracy Work grant from the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF), awarded to the League of Women Voters of Ames and Story County. This project is also supported in part by community donors.

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Citizens' Handbook

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD.

Government and politics can sometimes seem confusing when there's such a variety of political institutions, policies, and individuals involved. Nevertheless, everyone has the capability to understand the basic structure of our political system. Participating in politics is not difficult. The key is knowing who to talk to, what to say, how to say it, and how to get involved. This handbook provides an overview of the U.S. political system's structure and explains how you can participate in various ways across all levels of government.

KNOW THE BASICS.

The United States is a representative democracy. There are parts of the U.S. political system where people make decisions on public policy directly (e.g., voting on a local tax referendum). In other instances, elected officials do it on our behalf (e.g., members of Congress voting on the national budget). Either way, your informed political participation is extraordinarily important!

The political system operates under a federal structure. Federalism means that there are multiple levels of government —national, state, and local—exercising power over people and influencing and impacting one another.

The national government has authority over issues such as coining money, making treaties with other countries, and declaring war. State governments are generally responsible for tasks such as conducting elections, while local governments are primarily responsible for activities like zoning regulations or maintaining local parks. Some powers, such as the power to tax, are shared powers exercised by multiple levels of government. People who want to participate in a democracy need to know which level of government is responsible for a particular policy area or decision. You do not write the President of the United States if you have issues with the local school. Similarly, you do not write to your local mayor with questions about social security.

The U.S. political system is oftentimes characterized as pluralist. This means that there are numerous opportunities for you and other individuals to participate in the political process. You can join a political party or an interest group and attempt to influence an elected official's vote on an issue. Even after a vote on a bill, it is not over. An executive branch agency may need to develop rules that have the force of law to implement a bill, and interest groups and individuals like yourself can attempt to influence the policy process. Finally, individuals and groups can file lawsuits in court to challenge laws. Opportunities to participate are virtually endless and can occur at all levels of government!

There is one important thing to note at the outset about political participation. Anyone can participate in politics. There are no age or citizenship restrictions on participation, with one important exception: voting. States have residency, age, and citizenship requirements for individuals to be eligible voters.

In the state of Iowa, for example, Article II of the Iowa Constitution limits voting in elections to “only a citizen of the United States.”

Anyone can make a difference by staying informed, following the legislation that matters to them, and advocating for the policies they would like to see enacted.

PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

The national level of government is likely the one most familiar to people. Congress, the Supreme Court, and the office of the President of the United States are all well-known institutions.

Policies at this level are made for the entire United States.

Examples include issues like national defense or immigration policy. The U.S. Constitution structures these institutions and creates processes for bills to become laws. Understanding these structures and processes is crucial for individuals like you who aim to influence policy at the federal level.

THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION.

A good starting point for examining government and politics in the United States is the United States Constitution (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/usconst.asp). The U.S. Constitution is the supreme law of the land. It provides the structural framework for our political system. The U.S. Constitution established a national government comprising three branches: the legislative branch, the executive branch, and the judicial branch. The legislature is responsible for writing laws, the executive branch implements these laws, and the judiciary reviews them to ensure that they do not violate the U.S. Constitution. In addition to structuring government, the U.S. Constitution also assigns powers and defines the roles of important political institutions and processes, such as the duties assigned to Congress and the impeachment process.

When the constitutional convention was convened in 1787, the original purpose of the delegates was to revise the Articles of Confederation, the existing governing document for the states. They effectively revised it out of existence. In its place, they presented the U.S. Constitution for state conventions to ratify.

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At just over 7,000 words, the U.S. Constitution is one of the shorter constitutions in the world.

Although it may seem unusual to consider today, there was significant opposition to the U.S. Constitution in many state governments at the time. Many opponents finally agreed to support the new constitution, but only if it contained amendments designed to limit national government power and protect individual rights. The Ten Amendments, collectively known as the Bill of Rights (<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights>), were added to the U.S. Constitution to address these concerns. They contain many familiar freedoms, such as the right to a jury trial, the right to bear arms, and the right to be free from cruel and unusual punishments. Freedoms contained in the First Amendment—free speech, free religious expression (and the right to be free from government establishment of religion), free press, and the right to petition government—are at the heart of political participation in our country.

The U.S. Constitution contains twenty-seven total amendments, many of which deal with voting and the selection of government officials. Voting is generally a state matter.

States have the authority to determine voter eligibility and the time, place, and manner of elections. While suffrage (the right to vote) at the time the Constitution was written was almost wholly limited to white, property-owning males, it has since been considerably expanded. The Fifteenth, Nineteenth, and the Twenty-sixth Amendments expanded voting rights to people of color, women, and eighteen-year-olds, respectively. The Seventeenth Amendment provides that citizens can directly select their United States Senators.

While states still can regulate voting and elections, they cannot restrict a person's right to vote based on race or gender, nor can they deny the right to vote for those eighteen or older based on age.

The Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution guarantee **Due Process**. This means that no person can be deprived of life, liberty, or property without Due Process (i.e., a process that is fair). Most people probably think about this in the context of criminal justice. Due Process requires that criminal defendants be guaranteed protections found in the Bill of Rights (e.g., the right to counsel, a speedy trial). However, the word "liberty" in the Due Process clause has also been interpreted by courts to encompass intimate personal rights, such as the right to marry.



The Fourteenth Amendment also requires that every state provide equal protection under the law, originally intended to protect newly freed African Americans from racially discriminatory state laws in the wake of the Civil War, has since been interpreted to constrain arbitrary government discrimination not only on the basis of race, but also on classifications such as gender, national origin, and, in many contexts, sexual orientation and other protected characteristics. These two clauses, the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause, are at the heart of many of the important freedoms that we enjoy in the United States. How they apply to particular policy issues, and questions are matters that are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by the judiciary.

What role do the people play in amending the U.S. Constitution? The public cannot directly amend the U.S. Constitution. However, individuals can play an indirect role. Article V of the U.S. Constitution spells out the two ways to amend the U.S. Constitution. The first method involves approval by two-thirds of both houses of Congress, followed by the ratification of the proposed amendment by three-fourths of the states. You can inform your representatives at the national level of your support or opposition to a proposed amendment.

The U.S. Constitution also could be amended by holding a new constitutional convention. Unfortunately, the Constitution does not specify the rules that would govern such a convention. A second constitutional convention could theoretically change anything in the U.S. Constitution! Any changes would need to be approved by three-quarters of the states.

Hundreds of proposed constitutional amendments, such as measures on flag burning or taxation, are introduced in each session of Congress, but very few advance because the level of support required for adoption is extremely high. Most constitutional amendments have either made structural changes to the Constitution or expanded important rights. Most policy issues (e.g., education, transportation) are addressed in federal and/or state legislation, or in state constitutions, rather than through the amendment process of the U.S. Constitution.

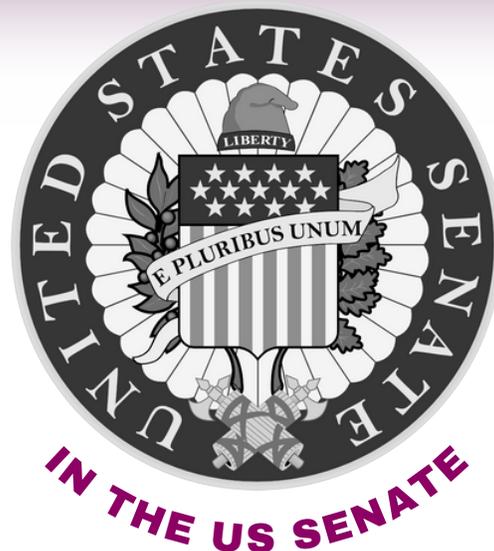
THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE BRANCH.

The legislative branch is designed to be the part of government most directly connected to you and the broader American public, offering many of the most visible avenues for political access and participation. There are numerous ways to follow legislative activities and communicate with the people's elected representatives. The legislative branch of government at the national level is known as Congress, which is responsible for enacting laws. Congress consists of two chambers, the United States House of Representatives and the United States Senate. The creation of Congress was a result of compromises between the northern and southern states, as well as between large and small states.

When the U.S. Constitution was being drafted, debates raged about how to count southern slaves for the purposes of taxation and representation. There were also disagreements between large and small states about how to provide "fair" representation in the legislature. Large states wanted representation based on population. Small states wanted each state to get equal representation.

Representation in the U.S. House of Representatives is based on population; therefore, a populous state such as California has over 50 members in the U.S. House of Representatives, while a sparsely populated state like Wyoming has only one. However, each state has two United States Senators regardless of population. This means that both Wyoming and California have equal representation in the United States Senate, despite the enormous population difference. All bills at the national level must pass both the U.S. House of Representatives and the United States Senate with the exact same wording to become law, so the two chambers must work together—and with the President of the United States—to pass legislation. This can become particularly challenging when one political party holds a majority in Congress and the President belongs to the opposing party. When gridlock of this nature occurs, very little happens at the national level.

WHO REPRESENTS YOU?



You can go online and find your U.S. Representative or U.S. Senator at <https://www.house.gov/> or <https://www.senate.gov/>, respectively.

There are 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives and 100 United States Senators. The state of Iowa has two members in the U.S. House of Representatives. Each United States Senator represents all of the people in a state, and there are two U.S. Senators for each state. Each member of the U.S. House of Representatives represents a geographical district within a state based on population. Each district has approximately the same number of people within it. However, this means the geographic boundaries and shape of a district can vary considerably. For example, there are several districts within the populous area of New York City, while the entire state of Wyoming is a single district. Generally speaking, state legislatures are responsible for drawing congressional and state legislative districts. Sometimes this process can be controversial.

State legislators frequently engage in a process called gerrymandering. Gerrymandering is a process in which one political party draws legislative districts in a way that maximizes its number of seats in both Congress and state legislative bodies. While legislative districts must have roughly the same number of people, they can be shaped in creative ways when gerrymandered. Gerrymandering is used to create “safe” seats for a political party, which has the effect of decreasing, or even virtually eliminating, electoral competition. The partisan division of voters makes it almost impossible for the opposing political party to win. As a result of gerrymandering, only a few dozen of the 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are routinely competitive. The remainder are regularly won by the same party every election. The courts have ruled that gerrymandering for partisan political purposes is constitutional, but gerrymandering along racial lines is not.

The distorting effects of gerrymandering have led several states to use non-partisan commissions to draw legislative districts, significantly reducing the impact of partisan politics and resulting in fairer, more competitive districts.

In Iowa, legislative and congressional district maps are drawn by the nonpartisan Legislative Services Agency (LSA) rather than by lawmakers themselves. The LSA prepares maps based on strict criteria—such as equal population, contiguity, and compactness—without considering political data or incumbents. A five-member Temporary Redistricting Advisory Commission reviews the proposals and holds public hearings, but cannot alter the maps. The Iowa Legislature then votes to approve or reject the plans without amendments, and the governor may sign or veto them. If the legislature fails to adopt a plan by the constitutional deadline, the Iowa Supreme Court assumes responsibility for creating and implementing the maps.

WATCH CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES IN ACTION!

Go online to watch.

(<https://www.congress.gov/committee-schedule/weekly>)

Located in Washington, D.C., both the U.S. House of Representatives and the United States Senate reside in the Capitol Building. The U.S. Congress has an extensive online presence. There is an online database that contains all congressional legislation, including the text of specific bills, who sponsors them, votes, and committee reports. It is also possible to sign up for online alerts, so you know when action has been taken on a particular bill.

Most of the legislative work in Congress is conducted through various committees that develop national policy in specific areas (e.g., agriculture, transportation, foreign affairs). Many committee hearings can be streamed online or are televised. Congressional committees also have their own web pages with hearing videos, membership information, reports, and other pertinent information. CSPAN and CSPAN2 offer full coverage of the U.S. House of Representatives and the United States Senate proceedings, respectively. These television channels offer additional programming, including committee hearings and other political shows. Schedule permitting, members of Congress can meet with visitors who live in their district in their Washington, D.C. office. These elected officials also have a handful of offices in their home state districts. Each Member of the House or Senate employs legislative assistants in Washington and their home states who provide a range of services to people in their districts who may be experiencing issues with federal agencies. These members of Congress are your elected officials. These elected officials and their staff can help you navigate the federal bureaucracy and assist you with your problems (e.g., a Veterans' Affairs claim, a Social Security check, or an issue with your passport). Finally, each member of Congress has their own website that details their committee assignments, their legislative agenda, and contact information (both in Washington, D.C. and in their home state field offices).

There are several resources available where you can learn more about the government and culture in the United States. The Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/>) was founded in 1800 and is the largest library in the world, with over 170 million items in hundreds of different languages covering a wide range of subjects, including law, politics, and culture.

The National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/>) is the entity that keeps records of all business conducted by the federal government. You can find presidential papers, genealogy records, historical photographs, and much more. The Congressional Research Service (<https://www.loc.gov/crsinfo/about/>) prepares a variety of reports for members of Congress on specific bills and larger issues, ranging from agriculture policy to counterterrorism efforts. These are available to the public at no cost and are an effective way to obtain background information on a particular issue or bill.

THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE BRANCH.

When the Framers drafted the U.S. Constitution, they spent a great deal of time considering the executive branch of government. They knew they did not want a King, but they wanted a chief executive with enough power to effectively carry out the responsibilities of the national government. The result is the office of the Presidency. While the constitutional powers of the presidency are largely unchanged since the U.S. Constitution was written, the office has grown considerably in terms of overall power and scope since World War II, particularly in military and foreign affairs.

The President of the United States is head of the executive branch of the national government. The Vice President of the United States assists the President and serves two functions. The Vice President is President of the United States Senate and gets to cast a vote on matters if there is a tie. While the Vice President rarely attends Senate proceedings, they have on occasion cast tie-breaking votes on important legislation.

The second duty of the Vice President is to assume the role of President of the United States if the President dies, resigns, becomes incapacitated, or is removed from office. If this occurs, the Vice President assumes the full powers of the presidency.

The President lives and works in The White House (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/>), in Washington, D.C., which is open to the public for scheduled tours. Although you can write, email, or call the President, this is not usually a meaningful way for most people to participate in national politics. The United States is so large that contacting such a high-ranking official is rarely a reliable or effective way to influence government decisions.

PRESIDENTIAL SELECTION.

The President and Vice-President are selected by the Electoral College, a political institution unique to the United States. The Electoral College was another compromise negotiated by the Framers of the U.S. Constitution. They rejected the idea that voters would be sufficiently knowledgeable to make an informed choice for President. The Framers did not want Congress to select the President either as this might make Congress too powerful. Historically, state legislatures selected the state's electors, but more recently the people of each state vote directly for their electors.

When the people of each state cast a vote for president, they are actually voting for electors who are pledged to support a particular presidential candidate. These electors in each state, in turn, cast votes for their pledged presidential candidates.

Voters do not directly elect the president, which leads some to complain that their vote does not really count. Since electors almost always support their candidate, the practical effect is the same. Most states allocate their Electoral College votes in winner-take-all fashion, which means even if a candidate wins 51% of the popular vote in a state, they will be awarded all that state's electoral votes. This can have the effect of providing the impression that the winning presidential candidate received far more support than they did.

But the U.S. Constitution does not mandate a winner-take-all format, and a handful of states award their Electoral College votes on a proportional basis to more accurately reflect the political division in their states. Some critics, including the League of Women Voters, advocate doing away with the Electoral College entirely and allowing voters to directly elect the President and Vice President. However, it would take a constitutional amendment to eliminate the Electoral College, something which is very difficult to achieve.

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Iowa, along with 47 other states, allocates its Electoral College votes using a winner-take-all system. Under this approach, the candidate who wins the statewide popular vote receives all of that state's electoral votes. Maine and Nebraska are the only exceptions to this rule; instead of winner-take-all, they allocate their electoral votes based on the distribution of votes within the state, awarding some votes by congressional district and others statewide.

A President can also be impeached and removed from office for "... Treason, Bribery, or other high crimes and Misdemeanors." The U.S. House of Representatives must pass articles of impeachment (a list of accusations) and the United States Senate determines whether the allegations are proved and warrant the removal of the President from office.

Presidents have been impeached, but no President has ever been removed from office through this process. President Richard Nixon is the only President to ever resign from office, a result of the Watergate scandal. (<https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/watergate>)

LAW MAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION.

The President must work with Congress to pass legislation. Congress writes bills and then sends them to the President. If the President signs a bill, it becomes law. If the President vetoes a bill, it is sent back to Congress. If two-thirds of Congress agrees, it can override the President's veto and the bill becomes law anyway. If there is not sufficient support in Congress to override the President's veto, the bill dies.

The primary job of the executive branch is to implement laws. There are many federal agencies who perform these tasks. These agencies and departments (www.federalregister.gov/agencies) are often staffed by political appointees at the top ranks and civil service professionals at lower ranks who have expertise in specific policy areas. Some have familiar names such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, while others such as the Merit Systems Protection Board are less well known.

Sometimes it can be difficult to know which agency or department you need to contact about a particular problem. In instances such as this, it is sometimes helpful to contact your members of Congress and seek assistance from their staff. They are quite knowledgeable about the federal government, and they can help you determine what federal agency you need to talk to, what you need to say, and how it should be said.

Lawmaking is not complete just because a bill is passed by Congress and signed by the President. Because members of Congress are not experts in all policy areas, the legislation they write is necessarily broad. Employees in federal agencies—policy experts— are often the ones who “fill in the details.” One mechanism for this is called rulemaking.

For instance, when Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act in 1974, it did not write the standards for what was considered “safe” in the statute itself. Instead, Congress tasked experts at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to create a rule setting the standards for safe drinking water based on scientific evidence. When an agency engages in rulemaking it publishes its intent to do so in the Federal Register. In the process of proposing, amending, and finalizing rules, the public has the opportunity to comment. This is a direct way that you can communicate your policy preferences to executive agencies as they announce the detailed guidelines that bring congressional legislation to life.

All proposed rules, changes in rules, and final rules are published in the Federal Register (<https://www.federalregister.gov/>), sometimes referred to as “The Daily Journal of the United States Government.” Notices of agency meetings, hearings, and Presidential documents (e.g., executive orders, proclamations) can also be found here.

OTHER PRESIDENTIAL POWERS.

The President of the United States also has the power to pardon individuals for offenses committed against the United States (except in cases of impeachment). Additionally, the President has the responsibility to deliver to Congress a report on the State of the Union.

While this was originally done through written messages, today's Presidents perform this task each year with a televised speech to Congress. These State of the Union speeches list the President's accomplishments and outline the President's agenda for the coming year.

The President has the power to appoint, with the "Advice and Consent" of the Senate, hundreds of government officials and federal judges. While some of these officials, such as the United States Secretary of State, only serve during the President's administration, federal judges essentially serve life terms. These judges often continue to make important decisions long after the President who appointed them has departed from office.

While the U.S. Constitution divides war and foreign affairs powers between the President and Congress, the reality is that the President has become the dominant actor in these areas. The President can negotiate treaties, but these treaties must be approved by two-thirds of the United States Senate. However, the President is largely in control of foreign affairs on a day-to-day basis.

The U.S. Constitution gives Congress the power to declare war, but the President has used their power as Commander-in-Chief to involve the United States in dozens of military conflicts. As a result, it is important for you as a voter to become informed about presidential candidates' positions, not just on domestic policies, but in foreign affairs as well.

There are a variety of places where you can find records and data on the presidency and past presidents.

The American Presidency Project (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>) is one of the best sources of presidential documents on the Internet (presidential speeches, executive orders, letters, news conferences, statistics, election data, etc.). Many retired presidents have presidential libraries that contain records and memorabilia from their time in the White House. These libraries are a good source of historical documents and data.

**Want to learn more about the President?
Go online to learn more.
(<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>)**

THE NATIONAL JUDICIAL BRANCH.

The Framers were somewhat divided about the judiciary during the constitutional convention. Some wanted only a supreme court while others wanted a larger court system. In the end, they compromised. The U.S. Constitution creates one Supreme Court, while Congress was given the power to create additional courts, which has resulted in a large federal judiciary. While it may seem like federal courts can hear cases on any issue, they are generally limited to cases that involve interpreting the U.S. Constitution, federal law, and treaties to which the United States is a party. While state courts are usually the ultimate judge of state constitutions and state statutes, federal courts may hear cases where state constitutions and statutes are alleged to violate the U.S. Constitution or they conflict with federal laws.

Federal District Courts are the trial courts in the federal system. They hear evidence and deliver verdicts in both criminal and civil matters.

If you lose at this level you may appeal to the Circuit Courts of Appeal. Most federal cases end at this level. If you lose your appeal at this appellate level, you may appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. However, success is unlikely since the Supreme Court has almost complete discretion to decide what cases it will hear, and it issues only about seventy-five full written opinions each yearly term.

Of the three branches of the national government, the judiciary is easily the most insulated from direct public involvement. Federal judges are not elected and cannot be removed by voters even if they issue unpopular or controversial opinions. Even though the federal courts are insulated from the public, they have historically issued opinions that do not stray too far from public opinion.

The Supreme Court has almost complete freedom to decide which cases it wants to hear and offers no explanation why certain cases are selected and others are not. Oral arguments are open to the public, but audio and video recording are prohibited. Federal courts have been largely resistant to calls for televising or audio streaming of proceedings, arguing that they might unduly impact them.

After oral arguments, Supreme Court justices meet in secret to discuss cases and assign opinions. Opinions are also written in secret and not released to the public until they are complete. They are then announced. Justices do not explain their opinions or justify their reasoning. This can sometimes make deciphering judicial opinions difficult for the public. If you want to influence the selection of a federal judge, contact your U.S. Senators and encourage them to either support or oppose a nominee. How does one participate when it comes to the judiciary?

You and the voting public have no direct role to play in the selection of federal judges, something criticized by many government observers given the fact that the Supreme Court hears dozens of cases on some of the most important issues of today such as abortion and the death penalty. The President of the United States nominates candidates for the federal judiciary at all levels. Each nominee must be approved by a simple majority vote of the United States Senate. If confirmed, federal judges serve as long as they exhibit “good behavior” (essentially a life term). Federal judges can be removed from office by the impeachment process just like the President of the United States and other executive branch officers, but this does not happen frequently.

You can join an interest group that lobbies United States Senators or files *amicus curiae* (“friend of the court”) briefs, which are documents that encourage judges to decide cases in a particular way.

Even if public participation regarding the federal judiciary is limited, it is still important to keep informed of judicial decisions because there are few important political issues of the day that do not eventually end up before the courts. Often, it is the courts that ultimately define the nature and scope of our rights and freedoms.



BRIEF HISTORY OF IOWA.

Iowa, which was originally a part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, became a U.S. territory in 1838 and entered the Union as the 29th state on December 28, 1846. It joined as a free state and strongly supported the Union during the Civil War, shaping a long Republican tradition. During the Progressive Era, Iowa enacted reforms such as railroad regulation, expanded education, and temperance initiatives, all of which are hallmarks of Progressivism. Iowa ratified the 15th Amendment (<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/15th-amendment>) in 1870, affirming voting rights regardless of race. Women's political milestones include Arabella Mansfield becoming the first woman admitted to the bar in 1869, Julia Addington's election to public office the same year, and Iowa's ratification of the 19th Amendment (<https://www.nps.gov/articles/iowa-and-the-19th-amendment.html>) on July 2, 1919, making it the 10th state to do so. Iowa also produced national suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt. Since 1972, Iowa's precinct caucuses have served as the first-in-the-nation presidential nominating event, gaining prominence after Jimmy Carter's 1976 campaign. In 1962, Iowa became the fourth state to adopt a merit-based judicial selection system, where commissions recommend candidates, the governor appoints judges, and retention elections follow.



The region now known as Iowa has been governed under three constitutions. The first applied to a much larger area that later became the separate states of Wisconsin and Iowa. The second constitution was ratified in 1846, when Iowa was officially granted statehood by the federal government. Iowa's third—and current—constitution took effect in 1857, expanding state authority and strengthening protections for civil rights. This also designated Des Moines as the state capital, replacing Iowa City and shifting the seat of government from eastern to central Iowa. Today, Des Moines remains the center of Iowa's political life.

THE IOWA STATE EXECUTIVE BRANCH.

The Governor is the chief executive of the state of Iowa. In many ways, the Governor of the state of Iowa has many of the same powers as the President of the United States, but there are also some important differences. Unlike the President who exercises considerable control over most federal executive branch agencies, many of the Iowa state executive branch agencies (https://ballotpedia.org/Iowa_state_executive_offices) are managed by independently elected cabinet officials who are elected through partisan elections. While the Governor and Lieutenant Governor are elected on the same ballot, Iowa citizens are able to vote for the Iowa Attorney General, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the State Treasurer.

The Governor of the state of Iowa is directly elected by voters and serves a four-year term. Unlike many states, Iowa does not have term limits on any executive offices – including the governorship – so governors can serve as long as they keep winning elections. Former Governor Terry Branstad served as Iowa’s governor for more than 22 years, making him the longest-serving governor in U.S. history.

Iowa Governors are an important factor in shaping the extraordinary agenda in state policymaking. As head of the various state agencies, such as the Iowa Department of Transportation and the Department of Natural Resources, the Governor has an early role in shaping the state’s budget and communicates these budgetary priorities to the Iowa Legislature in the annual “Condition of the State” address given annually at the start of each legislative session in January.

Iowa Governors have extensive executive, legislative, and judicial powers given to them by Article IV of the Iowa Constitution. Executive powers include the power to propose budgets to the Iowa Legislature and manage state agencies. Importantly, the Iowa Governor also exercises executive authority over the Iowa National Guard. Legislative powers include the power to convene the Iowa Legislature at any time for a special session and the power to approve or veto bills passed by the Legislature. Finally, judicial powers include the authority to appoint justices in the Iowa Judiciary and the power to grant pardons and reprieves.

Since 1998, the Lieutenant Governor of Iowa has been elected on a joint ticket with the gubernatorial candidate. The powers of the Iowa Lieutenant Governor are not explicitly defined in Iowa Code (<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/law/iowacode>) and as a result, the officeholder's level of involvement in state affairs largely depends on the responsibilities delegated by the Governor.

Typically, Lieutenant Governors in Iowa preside over the Iowa Senate, often appointing committees and influencing the workflow of legislation in that chamber. The Lieutenant Governor oftentimes represents the Governor at official and informal events, and becomes Governor if the Governor dies, resigns, or is removed from office.

More information about the office and the current Governor of Iowa can be found on the Iowa government website. (<https://governor.iowa.gov/>)



DYK
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Did you know that the budget process in Iowa is driven by the executive branch?

There are a number of reasons for this, including the fact that most state agencies are overseen by the governor, and as a result the governor proposes annual budgets to the Iowa Legislature at the beginning of each legislative session in January for each agency. The budget cycle in Iowa is a 30-month process, with 12 months taken to draft and pass the budget, 12 months to execute the budget (Iowa's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30), and six months to audit the budget. The governor will work closely with state agencies to develop their annual budget; the Revenue Estimating Conference within the Department of Management to determine the likely amount of tax revenue the state will have available to it during the upcoming fiscal year; and the Iowa legislature to introduce spending priorities that are ultimately debated and passed by the legislature during each legislative session. Lawmakers are legally restricted to appropriating no more than 99% of the estimated available revenue, which can include carry-forward funds from the previous year.

THE IOWA STATE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH.

The Iowa Legislature, officially known as the Iowa General Assembly, is the lawmaking body of the State of Iowa. It is a bicameral legislature, meaning it consists of two chambers: the Iowa House of Representatives and the Iowa Senate. Together, these chambers create laws, approve budgets, and provide oversight of the executive branch. The Iowa Legislature operates under a two-year cycle and meets annually in regular sessions beginning in January.

THE IOWA STATE HOUSE.

100 Seats, 2-Year Terms

The Iowa House of Representatives is the larger chamber of the Iowa General Assembly, consisting of 100 members. Representatives serve in two-year terms, and elections for all House seats occur in even-numbered years. This frequent election cycle ensures that the House remains closely connected to the voters and keeps Representatives responsive to public opinion.



THE IOWA STATE SENATE.

50 Seats, 4-Year Terms

The Iowa Senate is the smaller chamber, with 50 members serving in four-year terms. To maintain continuity, half of the Senate seats (25) are up for election every two years, meaning Senate elections occur alongside House elections in even-numbered years. This staggered system provides stability while still allowing for regular voter input.



The Iowa General Assembly meets annually, but the length of the session depends on the year:

- Even-numbered years: Sessions typically last 100 days.
- Odd-numbered years: Sessions last 110 days.
- These sessions are part of a two-year legislative cycle, during which bills can carry over from the first year to the second.

While legislators introduce bills, most legislation in Iowa is drafted by the Legislative Services Agency (LSA). This nonpartisan agency provides legal and technical expertise to ensure bills are properly written and comply with state law. Legislators work closely with LSA staff to turn policy ideas into formal legislation.

DYK
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The Iowa General Assembly meets in the Iowa State Capitol, which is topped with a 23-karat gold dome; the dome is so iconic that it has become one of Iowa's most photographed landmarks.



THE IOWA STATE JUDICIARY.

The judicial branch of government in the state of Iowa shares many characteristics with its federal counterparts, but it is also different in many respects. Unlike federal justices, justices in the Iowa judicial branch are appointed by the governor once approved by the Iowa Senate. Also, unlike federal judges, judges in the state of Iowa face retention votes, meaning that judges can lose their judgeship should citizens vote not to retain them when such votes take place. Iowa Courts are specifically created in Article V of the state's Constitution, and Iowa moved from partisan elections to a merit selection system with retention in 1962.

Like most states, Iowa courts hear both civil (private) and criminal (public) cases in the Common Law tradition. There are three levels of courts in Iowa: Courts of First instance and two Appellate Courts. Courts of First Instance in Iowa are called District Courts, and there are 99 District Courts in the state – one court for each county in Iowa. District Courts hear civil, criminal, juvenile and probate cases, and decisions from these courts of first instance can be appealed to higher appellate courts. These 99 courts are divided into eight judicial districts organized geographically across the state of Iowa.

The first appellate court is the Iowa Court of Appeals and is the state's intermediate appellate court, serving as the court of first appeal for most cases that are appealed out of Iowa's county-level district courts. It is composed of nine judges, all appointed by the governor and retained by voters. Rather than sitting as a full court, the judges hear cases in rotating three-judge panels, which allows the court to manage a large volume of appeals efficiently.

Appeals from District Courts do not go automatically to the Court of Appeals. Instead, all appeals are first filed with the Iowa Supreme Court, which then assigns most cases to the Court of Appeals for review. The Court of Appeals focuses on correcting legal errors, not retrying facts, and typically decides cases based on written briefs and, in some instances, oral argument. Its decisions are final unless the Iowa Supreme Court chooses to review the case further.

The second appellate court is the Iowa Supreme Court (<https://www.iowacourts.gov/iowa-courts/supreme-court>). The highest court in the state and the ultimate authority over the interpretation of Iowa law and the Iowa Constitution, the Iowa Supreme Court may accept cases that are appealed from the Iowa Court of Appeals or, on a very rare occasion, may decide to hear a case on appeal from District Courts. The Supreme Court is composed of seven justices, who are appointed by the governor from a list provided by a nonpartisan judicial nominating commission and then stand for retention elections every eight years. One justice is selected by the members of the court to serve as chief justice for a fixed term. Unlike the nine member Court of Appeals that hears cases in rotating three-judge panels, the Iowa Supreme Court sits en banc, meaning all seven justices hear and decide cases together.

The Iowa Supreme Court's primary role is to resolve the most significant legal questions in the state, ensure uniformity in the law, and provide final review of decisions from lower courts. All appeals are initially filed with the Supreme Court, which then retains the most important cases - such as those involving constitutional issues, significant public policy questions, or conflicting legal interpretations - and assigns others to the Iowa Court of Appeals.

In addition to its judicial function, the Supreme Court also has administrative authority over Iowa's court system, including setting rules of procedure, overseeing attorney discipline, and supervising the operation of the state judiciary.

The Attorney General (<https://www.iowaattorneygeneral.gov/>) is the chief legal officer in the state of Iowa. The Attorney General is elected to a four-year term by voters across the state. The Attorney General's office issues advisory legal opinions to state agencies, represents the state in criminal and civil appeals, maintains a consumer protection division, and organizes victim compensation programs.



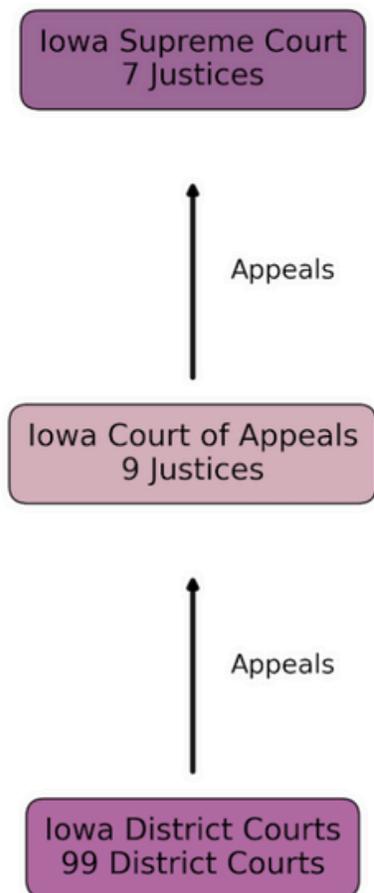
DYK

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In 1998, the Iowa legislature amended Iowa Code § 595.2(1) to define civil marriage as solely between "a male and a female," effectively prohibiting same-sex marriage and establishing Iowa's version of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). This statute became the focal point of the 2009 case *Varnum v. Brien*, in which plaintiffs argued that DOMA violated the equal protection clause of the Iowa Constitution. After a district court ruled the statute unconstitutional, the Iowa Supreme Court unanimously affirmed that decision in a 7 - 0 ruling, holding that DOMA violated equal protection and thereby legalizing same-sex marriage in Iowa. At the time, Iowa joined Massachusetts and Connecticut as one of only three states to recognize same-sex marriage.

Public reaction to the Court’s decision was largely negative, and several socially conservative interest groups mobilized in an effort to overturn the ruling. Although these efforts failed to reverse the decision itself, opponents pursued judicial accountability through Iowa’s retention elections. In November 2010, a majority of Iowa voters declined to retain the three Supreme Court justices whose terms were up that year and who had participated in the Varnum decision. Subsequent retention challenges in 2012 and 2014 were unsuccessful, as voters chose to retain the remaining four justices. To date, the three justices removed in 2010 remain the only Iowa Supreme Court justices ever voted out through the retention process.

STRUCTURE OF THE COURTS IN IOWA.



PARTICIPATING IN LOCAL IOWA GOVERNMENT.

While the news media spends a considerable amount of time covering national politics, the reality is that local governments likely have far more impact on your life on a day-to-day basis. Whether it is the pothole in the street outside your house, funding for the local elementary school, or management of the park where you exercise, these are all things largely handled by local government.

There are a variety of local government entities that exist (<https://www.iowa.gov/local-government>) in the state of Iowa. They are usually designated by geography and some of these local government entities overlap. Those who live in unincorporated rural areas are governed primarily by county and township governments, while those who live within city limits are governed by city governments. In Iowa, different local government entities share functions, such as access to libraries, emergency management, and economic development.

Dillon's Rule and Home Rule represent two contrasting approaches to local government authority. Under Dillon's Rule, local governments possess only those powers explicitly granted to them by the state, along with powers necessarily implied or essential to carrying out those grants, resulting in tight state control over local decision-making. Home Rule, by contrast, grants local governments broader authority to govern their own affairs unless expressly limited by state law. Iowa has operated as a Home Rule state since 1969, allowing cities and counties greater flexibility and autonomy in addressing local issues while still remaining subject to overarching state constraints.

COUNTY GOVERNMENT IN IOWA.

County government in Iowa serves as a key layer of local administration, providing essential services and implementing state law at the local level. Iowa is divided into 99 counties, each operating as a political subdivision of the state with authority over matters such as law enforcement, public records, property assessment, infrastructure, and social services. County governments are led by elected officials - including supervisors, sheriffs, auditors, and treasurers - who are chosen through partisan elections, meaning candidates run with formal party affiliations. This structure reflects Iowa's tradition of local control while closely tying county governance to the state's broader political system.

Township Government

Iowa is one of fewer than two dozen states that have townships. (<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/IR/797676.pdf>)

Townships are subdivisions of county governments in Iowa and are typically responsible for services, such as cemeteries and fire protection, to rural citizens in unincorporated areas that are not provided by cities. Since Iowa's counties are approximately the same size, most counties have sixteen townships each consisting of a clerk and trustees. By default, township trustees are elected to four-year terms, though the county Board of Supervisors can pass a resolution to fill trustee and clerk positions.

County Government

In Iowa, the Board of Supervisors serves as the primary governing body of each county, responsible for overseeing local administration and policy.

Typically composed of three or five elected members, the board manages the county's budget, sets property tax levies, and supervises county departments such as public works, human services, and emergency management. The Board of Supervisors also enacts ordinances, approves contracts, and represents county interests in regional and state matters. By balancing fiscal responsibility with community needs, the board plays a key role in ensuring effective and transparent local government across Iowa's counties. Typically, county supervisors serve four-year terms and are elected in partisan elections.

Much like the executive branch at the state level, counties in Iowa also have a number of elected executive officials who oversee county departments and their services. In Iowa these county executives include partisanly elected sheriffs, auditors, treasurers, recorders, and attorneys. Counties also have a variety of boards and commissions to which citizens can be appointed, usually by the Board of Supervisors.

CITY GOVERNMENT.

Unlike counties and townships which are subdivisions of the state government, city governments in Iowa are created at the local level and viewed as legal municipal corporations by Iowa code. As a result, cities are created when locals seek to incorporate and receive official recognition from the state, allowing them to operate as a specific type of legal entity created by the state to administer local government affairs. Cities in Iowa have a degree of autonomy and are granted a charter from the state, which sets forth the manner in which they will be governed. There are nearly 950 cities in Iowa which have varying types of local governance.

Iowa Code does not dictate what form of government cities must adopt, so cities upon incorporation are allowed to establish local governance as they see fit. That said, the mayor-council system of government is most popular, accounting for more than 95% of all local governments in Iowa. The mayor-council system has an elected mayor who serves as the executive of the city, while the council serves as the legislative branch – much like state politics in Iowa. Mayors can be “strong” or “weak”, with such designations largely dependent on city code which spells out the powers held by the mayor. Strong mayors oversee city departments, including police and fire departments, and usually have the power to veto legislation passed by the city council. On the other hand, weak mayors typically preside over city council meetings and are often the “face” of a city but have very limited formal powers. Mayors typically serve four-year terms and do not run in elections as partisans.

City council members also serve four-year terms and hold most of the legislative power in city government. Since 1975, Iowa Code has required cities in Iowa to maintain a five-member council, though many six or more member councils exist today in Iowa which were grandfathered in and thus allowed to remain. Because Iowa is a Home Rule state, cities have the authority to decide how city council members are elected, whether at-large by voters from the entire city, from specific districts or wards within the city, or through a combination of both systems.

In addition to the mayor-council system of government, Iowa law permits cities to operate under a council-manager form of government.

In a council–manager system, voters elect a city council, which then appoints a city manager to serve as the chief administrative officer responsible for day-to-day operations, implementing council policy, and supervising city departments; the mayor is selected from among the council members and has largely ceremonial and presiding duties. Regardless of the form of government, most cities in Iowa employ a city administrator to oversee the day-to-day operations of their city.

Engaging in local government matters because it is where the most immediate and tangible decisions affecting daily life are made. Local officials determine how services like police and fire protection, road maintenance, zoning, and utilities are delivered - often with direct and visible consequences for residents. Yet local government frequently receives the least public attention, even though it is the level of government closest to citizens and most responsive to their needs. Because service delivery happens nearest to home, informed and active participation at the local level can have an outsized impact on community quality of life and democratic accountability.

VOTING AND VOTING RIGHTS IN IOWA.

While it is generally accepted that more political participation and voting is better because more people are making their voices and preferences heard, the reality is that candidates for office, political parties, and many interest groups really want more voting and participation only from their supporters, not everyone.

This is understandable because elected officials and political parties have agendas and policies they wish to pursue. To this end, they attempt to mobilize their supporters to turn out and vote.

Unfortunately, some people and groups also attempt to suppress contrary opinions by discouraging those who do not share their views or positions from voting. This is not usually done openly. It is often done under the guise of protecting elections against voter fraud. Yet, preventing voter fraud is important. This is one of the reasons why voters must register. Voters need to be assured that elections are fair and that the person who won was truly the one with the most lawful votes.

Voter fraud can take a variety of forms including voting in an election where one is not eligible, or attempting to vote multiple times. However, it is important to note that study after study shows that voter fraud of all kinds is very rare. It does occur on occasion, but in today's elections there is no reliable evidence that widespread, systematic voter fraud exists in the United States. While additional regulations such as photo ID requirements might reduce instances of voter fraud, there is also evidence to show that additional regulations depress voter turnout.

There are a number of good sources attesting to the low prevalence of voter fraud. The Heritage Foundation Database (<https://electionfraud.heritage.org/>) keeps track of recent voter fraud cases that can be accessed by state. This database lists 26 instances of documented voter fraud in the state of Iowa from 2011-2024 that ended in a criminal conviction, with just two convictions since 2020. Similarly, a detailed Brennan Center report (<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/truth-about-voter-fraud>) examining voter fraud across the United States concluded that fears of widespread voter fraud were generally exaggerated. The Associated Press conducted an exhaustive examination after the 2020 elections and concluded that there was no significant voter fraud that impacted the presidential election.

Deciding who gets to vote and how that process is conducted is almost wholly a state function, with the exception of a handful of specific provisions in the United States Constitution which ensure that states cannot deny the right to vote based on race or sex. This state power over the voting process flows from Article II, Section 4 of the United States Constitution which instructs that “The Times, Places and manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof.” As a result, each state decides where polling places are located, when absentee ballots are permitted, what voting hours apply, and whether voters must present a photo ID, among other provisions.

The Iowa Secretary of State is the Chief Elections Officer in Iowa (<https://sos.iowa.gov/>). The Secretary of State is elected to a four-year term by voters of the state. Acting as the State Commission of elections, the Secretary of State office supervises the 99 Iowa County Auditors in the administration of Iowa election laws and administrative rules. (<https://sos.iowa.gov/elections-voting>) The State Commission of this office receives candidate filings, assists in the administration of campaign finance laws, tracks voter registration, and oversees elections in the state.

There are basically two types of elections: Primary elections and general elections. They share many similarities, but there are a few important differences.

In a primary election, multiple candidates in each party are vying for the opportunity to be their party’s representative in the subsequent general election. Iowa is a “partially open” primary state, meaning you can vote in either party’s primary, but you have to choose one party and only vote in that party’s primary when the primary election occurs.

While this can be considered a form of “registration” with that particular political party, it does not permanently bind you to that party. You can vote for anyone in the general election and change your affiliation and vote in the other party’s primary in the next election cycle if you choose. Winners in the primary election move on to represent their respective parties in the general election. If you do not want to declare a party affiliation in a primary election, you still have the right to cast a ballot on any public questions that might be on the ballot.

All eligible voters can vote in the general election. The candidates who win in the general election earn the right to hold the office they are seeking. Rules for winning elections can vary, since the parties determine the amount of votes a candidate needs (usually 35%) to secure the party’s nomination, while the State determines the amount of votes a candidate needs in a general election to secure the seat (usually a simple plurality).

WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO VOTE?

You have the right to vote in Iowa if you meet all of the following conditions:

- You are a U.S. citizen.
- You are a resident of Iowa.
- You are at least 18 years old on or before Election Day
- You registered to vote (Iowa allows same-day voter registration)
- You are not currently incarcerated for a felony conviction

Given this list of requirements, voting in Iowa is relatively accessible in terms of voter eligibility, particularly with same-day registration and automatic restoration of voting rights after felony sentences are completed.

REGISTERING TO VOTE IN IOWA

Just because you meet residency and age requirements does not necessarily mean that you are automatically eligible to vote. First, you must register to vote! Generally speaking, registration is designed to prevent voter fraud like voting when you are not eligible, or voting more than once, or voting in the wrong district. Most states require prospective voters to register two to four weeks prior to an election in order to ensure that the voting rolls are accurate on election day, but as noted above Iowa allows same-day registration. Research shows that same-day registration increases voter turnout in states that have it.

In Iowa, you can register to vote in a variety of ways:

To pre-register to vote in an election citizens may complete a voter registration form (<https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/voteapp.pdf>) and return it to your county auditor's office. College students may choose to register to vote at their home address or at their college address, but not both.

You can register to vote online by visiting the Iowa Department of Transportation website ([https://mymvd.iowadot.gov/Account/Login?ReturnUrl=%2fVoter Registration](https://mymvd.iowadot.gov/Account/Login?ReturnUrl=%2fVoter%20Registration)). You will need to have your driver's license or non-operator ID available.

You can also print the paper form and mail the completed form to your County Auditor. You will need to provide your Iowa driver's license or your non-operator card as proper identification. Again, the printed form is <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/voteapp.pdf>.

When registering to vote in Iowa, individuals have the option to indicate a political party preference. Declaring a party preference is not required to vote in a general election.

However, because Iowa uses a closed primary system, voters must declare a party preference to participate in a party's primary election, which is used to select that party's candidates for the general election. A party preference is also required to take part in the Iowa caucuses. As noted earlier, Iowa permits same-day voter registration and party declaration on the day of caucuses, primary elections, and general elections.

The Iowa Secretary of State maintains an excellent page regarding registration and voting in the state here (<https://sos.iowa.gov/elections-voting>).

WHERE DO YOU GO TO VOTE?

The state of Iowa provides information on where to vote through a number of webpages. The most helpful is likely VOTE411 (<https://www.vote411.org/>), a one-stop-shop established by the League of Women Voters Education Fund (LWVEF) in 2006.

VOTE411.org allows you to enter your residential address to access important information regarding voter registration and ballot issues in your area. Since voting locations can vary from election to election, and even within precincts, it is important that you know where you will be allowed to vote.

In addition to helping Iowa citizens know where to vote, VOTE411 also provides links to help citizens register to vote and check their registration to see if their registration is current. Citizens may also go to the Secretary of State's website to determine whether they are properly registered to vote (<https://apps.sos.iowa.gov/elections/voterreg/regtovote/search.aspx>).

WHAT IS THE VOTING PROCESS? KNOW YOUR OPTIONS!

Absentee Voting by Mail

If you know that you will be unable to vote in person on election day, you may submit an Absentee Ballot Request from your county auditor. (<https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/absenteeballotapp.pdf>)

To request an absentee ballot you must:

- Be a registered voter with an active registration
- File a written application for a mailed absentee ballot no more than 70 days before an election
- File a written application for a mailed absentee ballot no later than 5 pm 15 days before the election
- Fully complete the Absentee Ballot Request and submit it to your county auditor.

Absentee ballots must be received in the mail by 8 p.m. on Election Day. You may also hand-deliver your ballot to your county auditor during business hours or any time up until 8 p.m. on Election Day. Finally, you may ask someone to return your ballot under one of the following circumstances:

- The person is an immediate family member.
- The person is a member of your household.
- You are disabled and have chosen someone to return your ballot on your behalf.

Directions and rules for designating someone to return your ballot are included in the official instructions included with your mailed ballot. Please note that absentee ballots can only be returned to your county auditor and not to your precinct polling place, which is likely to be a different location.

Absentee Voting in Person

You may cast an absentee ballot in person at your county auditor's office before any election.

However, you must vote your absentee ballot at the auditor's office and you may not take the ballot home with you. For voters who need assistance in marking their ballots an accessible ballot marking device is available at the county auditor's office.

For primary and general elections, absentee ballots will be available no earlier than 20 days at the county auditors' offices.

For all other elections, ballots will be available as soon as they are ready, but not sooner than 20 days before an election.

In-person absentee voting is not available on election day at the auditor's office unless the polls open at noon. If the polls open at noon, you may cast an absentee ballot at the county auditor's office from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. on election day.

In-Person Voting

On election day, the polls in Iowa are usually open from 7 am to 8 pm. Since Iowa law requires each voter to vote in the polling place for the precinct where the voter lives, voters should understand where their voting location is by contacting their county auditor or finding their location online at VOTE411 (<https://www.vote411.org/>) or the Secretary of State's webpage. (<https://apps.sos.iowa.gov/elections/voterreg/pollingplace/search.aspx>)

Iowa law requires voters to confirm their identity with identification, preferably a state-issued identification card with photo identification. A state-issued driver's license or non-operator ID is also acceptable. Voters who have neither are mailed an Iowa Voter ID Card at the time they register to vote or update their registration. In addition, voters can also present a U.S. passport, U.S. military or veteran ID, or Tribal ID card or document

In-Person Voting Contd.

An Iowan planning to vote on election day without one of the approved forms of identity for pre-registered voters may have the voter's identity attested to by another registered voter in the precinct or may prove identity and proof of residence using Election Day Registration Documents.

As noted above, Iowans are allowed to register and vote on election day. To do the former, residents must provide Election Day Registration Documents which must prove both who you are and where you live. The best way to do this is with your valid Iowa driver's license or issued ID with your current address printed on it.

In addition, citizens may use the following to provide proof of ID:

- Out-of-state driver's license or non-operator ID
- U.S. passport
- U.S. military or veteran ID
- ID card issued by employer
- Student ID issued by Iowa high school or college
- Tribal ID card/document

In addition to state-issued ID cards, proof of residence can be established by providing one of the following acceptable proofs of residence:

- Residential lease
- Utility bill (including a cell phone bill)
- Bank statement
- Paycheck stub
- Government check or other government document
- Property tax statement

Finally, if you cannot prove who you are and where you live with the documents listed above, a registered voter from your precinct may attest for you. Both you and the attester will be required to sign an oath swearing the statements being made are true.

Falsely attesting or being attested for is registration fraud. It is a class "D" felony and is punishable by a fine of up to \$10,245 and up to 5 years in prison.

CHALLENGES AND PROVISIONAL BALLOTS.

In Iowa, a voter's eligibility may be challenged under state law if someone believes the voter is not qualified to vote in that election.

Challenges can occur in a few situations:

- A registered voter challenges someone at the polling place before the voter casts a ballot.
- A poll watcher or official challenges absentee ballots or provisional ballots during processing.

Challenges must be based on specific legal grounds, and challengers must follow protocol, including completing a written statement of the reasons for the challenge. Blanket or baseless challenges are prohibited.

At the polling place, challenged voters may be asked questions - for example about their residence or age - to determine whether they are qualified. If the challenge is withdrawn, voters can cast a regular ballot; if it is not withdrawn, voters are offered a provisional ballot instead.

A provisional ballot is a temporary ballot voters can cast when there is a question about their eligibility, but voters still want to cast a vote. **In Iowa, provisional ballots are used when:**

- A voter cannot provide ID when required at the polls (e.g., they lack acceptable ID or no attester).
- A voter was sent an absentee ballot but did not surrender it at the polls.
- A voter's qualifications are challenged at the polling place.
- Voters in precincts without electronic pollbooks who register and vote on Election Day may also cast provisional ballots.

After the election, a special precinct Election Board reviews all provisional ballots along with any challenged absentee ballots. The Board typically meets the Monday after the election to determine whether each provisional ballot should be counted. The board considers the information on the ballot envelope, evidence of registration, and any documentation the voter provided.

- If a provisional ballot is accepted, it is counted in the official tally.
- If it is rejected, the county auditor must notify the voter (typically within 10 days) with a reason.

TEN WAYS TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS AND MAKE AN IMPACT.

Political participation is at the heart of a democratic political system, and there are a variety of ways in which you can contribute to political discussions and the policy making process.

#1 BECOME INFORMED

It is easier than ever to get access to information on politics and public policy with the rise of reliable Internet. The default in a democratic political system is that government information should be available to the public unless there are good reasons to withhold it (e.g., personnel decisions, private health information). There are laws such as the Freedom of Information Act (<https://www.foia.gov/>) which govern the release of government information. The state of Iowa has a similar statute called Iowa Open Records Act as well as the Iowa Open Meetings Law for meetings. The Iowa Public Information Board can help residents navigate the request for information. (<https://ipib.iowa.gov/>)

#2 BE AN ADVOTATE

Advocacy is any general support for a position, idea, or cause. The goal of advocacy is to educate others about an issue and raise public awareness of why that issue is important. Anyone can become informed and advocate to anyone in general positions on public policy issues. This can take the form of conversations with friends, posting something on social media, or attending a rally. Find something you are passionate about and share that with others!

However, once you move from supporting a general position or idea to seeking a specific vote or policy outcome from a government official or government unit, you have moved from advocacy to lobbying.

#3 LOBBY

Lobbying is any attempt to influence a politician or public official on a particular issue, bill, or piece of legislation. This can take a variety of forms: letter writing, meeting with public officials, or meeting with legislative staff.

While individuals can lobby themselves, groups often hire professional lobbyists in an attempt to get their preferred policy positions enacted. Paid lobbyists must register (<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/lobbyist/onlinefiling>) with either the federal government or the state of Iowa. If you hire a paid lobbyist, you must register as well. This is done to ensure transparency in the law-making process.

#4 JOIN AN INTEREST GROUP

An interest group is an organization of like-minded individuals who seek to influence the selection of public officials and the policies they make (e.g., Iowa Farm Bureau, the American Heart Association, or the Iowa Bar Association). This is also a great way to participate in politics with like-minded people on a specific public policy issue.

Interest groups differ from political parties in that parties want to run government while interest groups instead seek to influence a part of it, often times through advocacy and lobbying efforts.

#5 JOIN A POLITICAL PARTY

A political party is an organization that nominates candidates to compete in elections with the goal of implementing a specific slate of policies. These ideas are often articulated in a party platform. Revise sentence: Political parties can be excellent places to meet like-minded political activists, and they offer many different opportunities for volunteering. Parties epitomize the idea that there is strength in numbers. The two main political parties in the United States are the Democratic and Republican parties, but there are also numerous third parties, such as the Libertarian Party.

Iowa Democrats (<https://iowademocrats.org/>), Iowa Republicans (<https://www.iowagop.org/>), and Iowa Libertarians (<https://lplia.org/>) also have state and local arms of the national parties so citizens can get involved at any level of government.

#6 PLAN YOUR VOTE, THEN WORK YOUR PLAN

As noted, you must be registered to vote before casting a ballot in Iowa, but the good news is that you can register and vote on the same day - including Election Day itself. Voting in state and local elections is one of the most important things you can do, since policies passed at these levels of government have the most direct impact on voters.

Whether you register at least 15 days before the election, use the online system, or take advantage of same-day registration - ensures you're ready to make your voice heard when Election Day arrives. Plan your vote and remember that polling places are typically open from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. Don't forget to bring acceptable identification and proof of residence to make the process go smoothly.

#7 ATTEND OR STREAM A PUBLIC MEETING

One of the hallmarks of democratic government is transparency. Part of this involves conducting government business in public. In Iowa, political jurisdictions such as cities, counties, and state governments must have open meetings which require government officials, legislative bodies, committees, and commissions to give notice of a meeting and a record of the proceedings. The idea is simply that people should be able to watch government officials make decisions and review the results of those decisions. (<https://ipib.iowa.gov/open-meetings>). There are often set-aside times in meetings for public comments on various issues. While this provides an opportunity to directly communicate with government officials in public, you should note that the number of speakers, the time to speak, and the topics which may be addressed are often limited.

Twenty-first century technology now provides more access to government meetings than ever. Many meetings can now be streamed online and are archived so that people who cannot attend in person can still watch the proceedings.

#8 CONTACT PUBLIC OFFICIALS

The whole purpose of a representative democracy is that public officials are acting on behalf of their constituents. To act on their behalf, it is helpful to know what people are thinking. This is why it is important to contact your public officials and express your opinions on issues!

There are a wide variety of ways to communicate with government officials: telephone, email, website, public meeting, schedule a one-on-one meeting, or writing a letter.

There are a variety of Internet sites that are helpful when planning to contact an elected official. For instance the University of California, Berkeley (<https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/ContactingOfficials/Tips>) provides excellent recommendations, as do local chapters of the League of Women Voters. (<https://lwvnewton.org/voters-service/tips-for-contacting-elected-officials/>)

#9 SERVE ON A JURY

While some people might view jury duty as an inconvenience, it is an exceptionally important part of our criminal justice system. Juries are a vital check against potential abuses of government power. When you are called, do your part.

#10 PARTICIPATE IN STATE AND LOCAL CAMPAIGNS...OR EVEN RUN FOR OFFICE!

Volunteer for or work on local or state political campaigns, including canvassing, data work, or communications. Many state and local elections are understaffed and underfunded, so your engagement would most likely be welcome. Of course, you could also run for office, and the Secretary of State's Office (<https://sos.iowa.gov/>) is a great place to get information!

CONCLUSION: YOUR VOICE MATTERS IN DEMOCRACY.

Understanding how government works is the first step toward making a real difference in your community and our country. As this handbook has shown, the United States political system is built on a foundation of representative democracy—a system that only works when people like you choose to participate. Whether you're learning about Congress, state legislatures, or your local city council, the takeaway is the same: there are countless ways to make your voice heard and shape the future you want to see.

Remember that government exists at multiple levels - national, state, and local. Each level handles different responsibilities and understanding which officials handle which issues is crucial. You don't need to wait until you're old enough to vote to make an impact. You can become informed about the issues that matter to you, advocate for causes you believe in, and speak up at public meetings. You can join clubs and organizations focused on topics you care about, volunteer for campaigns, and communicate directly with elected officials who represent you.

When you do reach voting age, make sure you're registered and ready to cast your ballot. Voting is your direct voice in choosing who represents you—from local school board members to the President of the United States. Iowa makes this even easier by allowing same-day voter registration, so there's no excuse not to participate. The policies decided by your elected officials affect your daily life in tangible ways—from the quality of your schools and local parks to the cost of college and the environment you'll inherit.

Finally, understand that democracy is not a spectator sport. It requires active participation from ordinary citizens like you. Throughout history, major changes—from expanded voting rights to civil rights protections to environmental safeguards—happened because people got involved and demanded better. You have the same power in your hands. The government needs to hear from you. The policies you support matter. The candidates you help elect matter. Your participation matters.

As you prepare to become a full participant in the political process, use the tools and resources outlined in this handbook. Stay informed, ask questions, and never hesitate to reach out to your elected officials. Whether you're contacting your representative about education policy, attending a local city council meeting, or eventually casting your first vote, know that you are an essential part of making democracy work. Your voice, combined with thousands of others in your community, has the power to create change. The future of Iowa and the United States depends on informed, engaged citizens like you stepping up to the challenge.





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