Voting

Voting is a method by which groups of people make decisions. In most countries, people vote to choose government officials and to decide public issues. People also vote to make decisions in such groups as juries, labor unions, corporations, and social clubs. This article deals with voting in political elections.

The right of citizens to select their leaders in open elections is a key feature of democracy. Specific election rules vary. In direct elections, the citizens themselves vote for the officials. In indirect elections, the citizens elect representatives, who then choose the officials. For instance, the president of the United States is elected indirectly. The voters of each state select electors, who make up the Electoral College. The Electoral College, in turn, chooses the president.

Many voting decisions are based on majority rule. Under majority rule, a candidate must receive more than half the votes in order to win. A decision by plurality may be used when there are more than two candidates. A candidate with a plurality receives more votes than any other candidate, but does not necessarily have a majority of the votes. In some countries, elections are conducted according to proportional representation. Under such systems, a political party is represented in government in proportion to its share of the total vote.

People can vote on a variety of issues. For example, they may vote on whether the government should build a school, expand the police force, or impose a tax. Under some systems, voters may approve or reject proposed laws through elections called referendums. A recall election allows voters to remove elected officials from office before the end of their term.

Citizens in nondemocratic countries usually have little real choice in voting matters. In many such countries, people may vote in elections, but only for candidates named by the country's leadership.

Who may vote. Governments usually require that citizens reach a certain age before they have the right to vote. In most countries—including the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom—the minimum voting age for national elections is 18. Governments also usually require that people live in the country for a certain number of years before they can vote.

All democracies limit the right to vote in certain cases. In many countries, for example, people who are serving prison sentences for certain crimes are not allowed to vote. Some countries deny the voting rights of people with certain types of mental disabilities.

Democratic nations have extended suffrage (the right to vote) to many people who were
once denied that right. For instance, women could not vote in many countries until the early 1900’s. In South Africa, a policy of apartheid (racial segregation) denied black citizens the vote for many years. The policy ended in 1991.

The Constitution of the United States has been amended several times to extend voting rights. The 15th Amendment, adopted in 1870, prohibited states from denying a citizen the right to vote because of race. The 19th Amendment, adopted in 1920, protected the voting rights of women.

In the United States, even after the adoption of the 15th Amendment, several states sought to deprive African Americans of their voting rights. Certain states required citizens to pay a poll tax to gain the right to vote. Officials in some states applied the poll tax laws only to African Americans and poor whites. In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act to prevent these and other methods of depriving people of their rights.

Registration is the process by which a person’s name is added to an official list of qualified voters. On election day in many countries, officials check each person’s name against the registration list before they let the person vote. In some countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, the voter receives a voter registration card. In the United States, voters can usually register in person or by mail. In most states, voters remain permanently registered unless they move.

Many governments do not require formal registration prior to an election. Instead, they require people to show proof of citizenship or residence—such as a passport or identification card—before voting.

Voting districts. Many countries, states, and provinces are divided into areas called districts for election purposes. The smallest voting areas in the United States are called precincts. In the United Kingdom and several other countries, voting districts are called constituencies. Citizens usually vote at a polling place in the district where they live.

In most countries, each district has about the same number of inhabitants and equal representation in government. The boundaries of voting districts must sometimes be changed to reflect changes in population. The redrawing of district boundaries is called redistricting. In some countries, members of government have sought to use redistricting to favor one political party over another. This process is called gerrymandering.

Since 1962, the Supreme Court of the United States has issued several rulings concerning redistricting. The rulings have sought to ensure that each voter has equal power in the election process.

Methods of voting. Until the 1800’s, voting was usually conducted orally and in public. But as more people gained the vote, many countries began using written ballots. For many years, the ballots of different political parties had distinct features that made it easy for onlookers to see what party a voter supported. But under this system, some citizens faced pressure to vote in certain ways, and bribery was common. As a result, many countries began using secret ballots. Today, most countries use a system in which each voter marks a ballot while alone in a booth.

Many countries use voting machines—that is, mechanical devices or computerized systems for recording and counting votes. The oldest type of voting machine is the lever machine. With lever machines, voters use a pointer to select candidates and then pull a lever to enter their votes.

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Voting methods have changed as technology has advanced. Since the late 1900's, computerized voting systems have become increasingly popular. With punch card systems, voters select candidates by punching holes in computer cards. The cards are then fed into a card reader, and a computer totals all valid votes. With optical scanning systems, voters mark ballots that are then fed into a computerized scanning device. Other types of computerized systems allow voters to make selections by pushing buttons or by touching boxes on a computer screen. Oregon has conducted elections entirely by mail since 1998, and other U.S. states have begun using the same method. Some governments have experimented with allowing voters to cast ballots over the Internet.

Most governments allow absentee voting for citizens who are unable to vote in person. Absentee voters send their ballots by mail. Absentee voters may include people in the armed forces, college students, people with disabilities, and travelers who are abroad on business or vacation. In some countries, a voter may authorize another person to cast a vote for him or her. Such a vote is called a proxy vote. Another nontraditional voting method is early voting. Early voting allows people to vote in special polling places before the election.

If a voting machine system is used, votes are counted automatically. But in some elections, paper ballots must be counted by hand. If the result of an election is close, one or more recounts may be held.

**Voting behavior.** Many people do not exercise their right to vote. Voter turnout is the percentage of people qualified to vote who actually vote. Since the 1970's, voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections has usually been between 50 and 55 percent. In many other democracies, voter turnout is 80 percent or higher. Turnout is usually higher for national elections than it is for state, provincial, and local elections.

Social scientists in many countries have examined the voting patterns of various groups. In most countries, men have traditionally been more likely to vote than women. But the number of women voters has increased significantly since the 1970's. In some countries, such as the United States and Japan, women are now more likely to vote than men. Studies have also shown that people between the ages of 55 and 75 are more likely to vote than people of other ages.

Many voters consistently support one political party over another. Others, called independents, do not have loyalty to a party. Family and social background can greatly influence how people vote. For example, many people adopt the same political party identification as their parents. Dramatic national or world events may also affect voting patterns. For instance, during the Great Depression of the 1930's, voters in the United States increasingly favored the Democratic Party, which emphasized government aid for the needy.

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