

# Pay Attention to State Elections—They Decide Our Everyday Rights

When most Americans picture an election, they imagine a president, U.S. senator, or U.S. representative on the ballot. But the truth is that many of the most consequential decisions shaping our lives don't happen in Washington, D.C.—they happen in the state capital. And too often, state legislative races are ignored or taken for granted. That has to change.

## Everyday Power: Why State Legislatures Matter

State legislatures determine far more of our daily experience than many realize. State legislatures set how federal and state elections are administered, regulate voting access, set policy on issues from healthcare to environmental regulations, and choose whether to ratify constitutional amendments. And most state legislatures draw the districts for our representatives (congresspersons) in the U.S. House—although some, including California, have used independent or advisory commissions to do the work of redistricting. Through these channels, state lawmakers are key actors in our democracy.

## Just the Facts

Research confirms that the threat of electoral accountability—that is, the fact that state legislators face voters—makes a difference. In states where legislators are reelection-eligible rather than term-limited, they sponsor more bills, serve on more committees, and turn up for more roll calls, according to the [Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research](#). The fact that you and I can vote for these seats makes a real difference.

## Los Angeles County Election Participation Rates 2020–24

| Election Year | Registered Voters | Ballots Cast | Turnout (%) |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------|
| 2020          | 5,709,853         | 4,338,191    | 75.9        |
| 2022          | 5,601,835         | 2,456,701    | 43.9        |
| 2024          | 5,736,803         | 3,793,106    | 66.1        |

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**But turnout is weak in the very places that matter most.** We know that when races are uncontested or turnout is low, democratic accountability suffers. In one study of Illinois, more than 4.7 million voting-age residents lived in districts with only one candidate for state legislative seats—meaning their vote offered no meaningful choice ([Illinois Policy](#)). In state races, turnout often lags behind turnout for national contests, meaning fewer voices shape the outcomes that affect us most.

## Why You Must Care

- If you don't show up, someone else will—and the policies they pass will shape schools, policing, infrastructure, climate resilience, healthcare access, and more.
- Because state legislatures administer how federal laws are implemented and how elections are run, low engagement means less oversight, fewer checks on power, and increasing departures from democratic norms ([Brennan Center for Justice](#)).
- Every vote counts. In local and legislative elections especially, margins can be razor-thin. Your participation can mean the difference between who sets the agenda and who sits on the sidelines ([APIAVote](#)).

## What We Must Do

- Register to vote, update your registration when you move or change your name, and VOTE in EVERY election, not just the presidential one.
- Educate ourselves about the candidates for our local state legislative districts—know who they are, what they'll prioritize, and how they'll behave in office.

- Take our responsibility to get informed about policy issues seriously, not just the night before an election. Learn from authoritative, trustworthy sources—and not just those that reinforce our biases.
- Demand contested races. If your district is uncontested, it’s time to ask why and to urge challengers to step forward. Competition keeps power responsive to citizens.
- Advocate for greater transparency and access—make sure your state supports fair district maps, unbiased administration of elections, and easy access to the ballot.
- Talk to your neighbors, families, and other networks. Many don’t vote in state legislative races because they assume “my vote won’t matter.” But it does, especially in times of great political division.

### **Speak Out, Show Up, and Vote**

If democracy matters to you, then show up for the races that often go unnoticed but matter enormously. Our state legislatures are the laboratories of policy and the gatekeepers of how federal mandates are brought to life. When you skip them, you forfeit your influence—and the system leans toward those who do show up. The result: minority rule. That’s not democracy.

**We can’t wait for Washington to see us—we must make our power visible, one state election at a time.**

### **Tu Voto Vale—Especially in State Elections**

State lawmakers decide how our rights work every day—from bilingual ballots and Dreamer scholarships to fair pay for essential workers. These local decisions shape our future.

Your vote counts—especially in smaller, state-level races where a few ballots can change outcomes.

Register, vote early, and remind your neighbors that every vote protects our voice and dignity.

### **Nuestro poder está aquí, en casa—en cada elección estatal.**

**Register or Check Your Voter Status at the L.A. Registrar by visiting [lavote.gov](http://lavote.gov).**

**When you vote, don’t just check the boxes for the big names.**

Locate your state legislative race, vote, and make your voice heard. Democracy doesn’t only happen in Washington—it happens at home, in your statehouse. The L.A. County Registrar of Voters is your best source for local election information.

### **State Elections: Where Young Voices Can Tip the Balance**

When young voters show up, they change everything. State lawmakers decide tuition costs, whether student IDs count for voting, and whether your community invests in renewable energy. Yet turnout for eligible voters under age 30 is low—even though these races are often decided by a few hundred votes.

Young voters have the power to change that. Ask candidates about housing, climate, and rights. Post about state races, not just the presidential ones. When you and your friends vote locally, you push the agenda nationally.

### **Your Voice Doesn’t Echo from Washington—It Starts at Home**

Our power starts in the statehouse. Our communities are too often treated as “low turnout,” but the system is designed that way. State legislatures most often decide how voting districts are drawn, which IDs count, and whether schools and clinics stay open.

When we organize, the data shifts fast. Bring your family, friends, church members, and neighbors. Vote for people who write the laws that affect your block. Every local vote is a stand for dignity, access, and belonging.

—Martha Y. Zavala, Advocacy Direct



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