

## State Elections Guide

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*Created for students*

Many people think the most important election is the presidential election. However, by solely focusing on this election, we overlook state elections which have a major impact on our daily lives. State offices are responsible for many government functions. They create state laws, are in charge of maintaining state lands and parks and can advocate for funding for your local district. Your vote especially matters in state elections as the outcomes of these races are sometimes decided by a few dozen votes. This guide will help you understand common state positions and their core responsibilities so that you can make the best decisions possible for your community and your state at the voting booth.

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### Attorney General

The attorney general of a state enforces both state and federal laws. They are sworn to uphold the United States Constitution and federal laws as well as the state's constitution.

### Governor

The governor serves as the state's chief executive officer and oversees the functions of the executive branch of government at the state level. They also review bills that are approved by both state legislative bodies. The governor can then sign the legislation to become law.

### Lieutenant Governor

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The lieutenant governor is to act as governor should the governor be temporarily absent from the office. The lieutenant governor generally succeeds a governor who dies, resigns or is removed in trial as well. Other duties vary widely by state.

## State House Representatives

State representatives serve two to four year terms, creating and ratifying state laws and regulations. They listen to the concerns of their constituents and speak for them. They develop solutions to the needs of their districts through legislative action.

## State Senators

State senators serve terms of two to four years depending on the state and represent larger districts than the state house. The state senate works to address state issues through passing legislation. Bills passed in the state house move to the state senate and vice versa.

## State Supreme Court Justices

On matters of state law, the judgment of a state supreme court is considered final in both state and federal courts. Decisions on state supreme court cases can be appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States if they involve federal law. State justices can be appointed or elected. The number of justices on each court varies between five and nine from state to state. Depending on the state, these justices can serve from six years to a lifetime appointment.

## Treasurer

The state treasurer serves as the state's head banker. The person in this position manages investments, deposits state money and keeps track of budget surpluses and deficits.

## Secretary of State (Secretary of Commonwealth in VA/MA/PA)

The secretary of state is the chief clerk of the state and in charge of important state records. In 35 states, the secretary of state is elected usually for a four-year term. The most common function of the secretary of state is to serve as the state's chief elections



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official. They can also regulate businesses in the state, appoint boards and commissions and enforce the financial disclosures of political committees. Other duties vary widely by state.

## **Auditor**

A state auditor oversees the spending of local governments in the state. The auditor performs audits of financial documents and statements for cities and towns within a state to ensure those entities are spending state-funded money properly. A state auditor can serve a term ranging from four years to a lifetime appointment depending on the state.

## **Comptroller/Controller**

The comptroller, also known as the controller in some states, is a state-level position in 19 states. They share duties similar to state treasurers, holding powers related to budgetary and management matters. This position can be elected, appointed by the governor or appointed by the state legislature.

## **State School Board**

State school boards are different in every state. Some are created by the state constitution and others by statute. Some members are elected and some appointed. Their responsibilities also vary from state to state. General responsibilities include creating statewide curriculum standards, deciding on high school graduation requirements and creating qualifications for teachers in the state.

## **Superintendent of Public Instruction/Superintendent of Schools**

The superintendent of public instruction, or the superintendent of schools in some states, is a statewide office responsible for overseeing and coordinating the state's elementary and secondary schools. Although they are appointed in the majority of states, 13 states hold elections for the office.

## **Commissioners**



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A commissioner supervises and inspects the work of others. In every state, there are various types of commissioners who are in charge of making sure state laws are being upheld in smaller regions of the state.

## **Secretary of Agriculture/Agriculture Commissioner**

The secretary of agriculture or agriculture commissioner is the head of a state's agriculture department. They oversee the agriculture industry as well as the promotion of state agriculture business. Twelve states use elections to select their agriculture commissioners.

## **Insurance Commissioner**

The insurance commissioner oversees regulation of the insurance industry in the state, including which insurance companies may do business in the state.

## **Labor Commissioner**

The labor commissioner oversees the administration of state labor laws, such as hours, safety and minimum age requirements.

## **Land Commissioner**

The land commissioner is responsible for the stewardship and conservation of public lands in the state.

## **Public Service Commissioners**

The public service commissioner regulates essential utility services such as energy, telecommunications and water.

## **Tax Commissioner**

The tax commissioner is responsible for administering the tax laws of the state.

## **Railroad Commissioners**

The railroad commissioner oversees the regulation of natural resources, including the oil and gas industry.



## Other State Terminology

### Ballot Initiative

The ballot initiative is a process that enables citizens to bypass their state legislature by placing proposed statutes and, in some states, constitutional amendments on the ballot. A total of 26 states have the ballot initiative process. There are two types of initiatives: **direct** and **indirect**. In the direct process, proposals that get enough signatures go directly on the ballot. In the indirect process, the proposal and signatures are submitted to the legislature, which may act on the proposal.

### Popular Referendum

A well-known type of direct initiative is called a popular referendum. It allows voters to approve or repeal an act of the state legislature. For example, voters in Idaho, Utah and Nebraska bypassed their state governments and voted to expand Medicaid. Arkansans gathered enough signatures and rallied enough voters to raise the minimum wage. Through a referendum, Michigan also passed some of the most expansive voter law changes that granted no-excuse absentee voting, automatic voter registration, election-day voter registration and straight ticket voting.

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## About Us

**Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP)** is a national nonpartisan project that helps administrators, faculty, staff and student leaders at America's institutions of higher education engage students in federal, state and local elections. CEEP views voting as a means to promote a more equitable and inclusive democracy and to address past and present disenfranchisement. To learn more, visit [campuselect.org](http://campuselect.org) or contact us at [info@campuselect.org](mailto:info@campuselect.org).

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