

# **I Have the Right to Vote**



## **A Guide for Massachusetts Self-Advocates**

**Department of Developmental Services**

**Office of Human Rights**



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## **Section 1: Things You Should Know**



## **What is voting and why is it important?**

Voting is a process for making decisions and choosing what we want. By voting, we express our opinions and make our voices heard. When we vote in a political election, we choose candidates who have some of the same beliefs that we do and can help us to get our wants needs met. By voting for a particular person, we are saying that we trust that person to fight for what we believe in. Voting is also a way for us to participate in the way our towns, cities, states and country are run. By voting we express our opinions about the rules that govern our society. Voting shows that we care about the community around us, and about our country as a whole.



# Definitions

**Election** – the process for choosing a candidate for a particular office or job

**Candidate** – the person trying to get elected

**Campaign** – what the candidate does to try to win your vote. A candidate may speak in public, participate in a debate, make a television commercial, or stand on the side of the road holding a sign with his or her name on it. These are all ways that the candidate is trying to get you to vote for him or her.

**Vote** – your personal decision or the choice you make in the election. You use a ballot to vote in an election.

**Ballot** – the form or page you use to mark your vote in an election

**Polling Place** – where you go to cast your ballot. Polling places are usually within walking distance to your house, and can be located in a school, a library, a church, a community center or other type of building.

**Poll Worker** – a person who works at the polling place on Election Day. Poll workers are responsible for setting up the polling place, keeping track of voters, providing ballots to voters, monitoring voting equipment and providing assistance.



## Your Rights

- You have the right to vote if you are a qualified registered voter.
- You have the right to vote in private. You have the right to vote without anyone trying to influence your vote and to vote in a booth that prevents others from watching you mark your ballot.
- You have the right to remain in the voting booth for five (5) minutes if there are other voters waiting and for ten (10) minutes if there are no other voters waiting.
- You have the right to receive up to two (2) replacement ballots if you make a mistake on your ballot.
- When voting, you have the right to request assistance from anyone you choose. If you do not bring someone with you, you have the right to have two (2) poll workers assist you.
- You have the right to vote if you are disabled. The polling place must be accessible, and there must be an accessible voting booth.
- You have the right to vote if you cannot read or write.
- You have the right to vote but must show identification if:
  - you are a first-time voter who registered to vote by mail and did not submit identification with the voter registration form
  - your name is on the inactive voter list
  - your vote is being challenged
  - requested by a poll worker



## Your Rights (continued)

- You have the right to vote by absentee ballot if:
  - you will be absent from your city or town on Election Day
  - you have a physical disability that prevents your voting at the polling place
  - you cannot vote at the polls due to religious belief
- You have the right to cast a provisional ballot if you believe you are registered, but a poll worker tells you that you are ineligible to vote.
- You have the right to follow up any challenge to your right to vote through the complaint process.
- You have the right to vote if you are not currently incarcerated for a felony conviction and have registered as a voter after your release.
- You have the right to take this list of rights or any other election materials into the voting booth with you. Please remember to remove all papers when you leave the booth.
- You have the right to vote at your polling place any time between 7am and 8pm for state and federal elections—hours may vary for local elections. If you are in line at your polling place when the polls close, you have the right to vote.
- You have the right to bring your children into the voting booth with you.
- If you feel that any of your voting rights have been violated in any way, call 1-800-462-VOTE. Please also report the violation to the Election Protection Hotline at 866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683).



## Questions and Answers

**Question:** I have cerebral palsy and a mild intellectual disability. Can I still vote?

**Answer:** Yes, people with physical and intellectual disabilities have the right to vote.

**Question:** I have a guardian. Can I still vote?

**Answer:** If you have a guardian, then your right to vote depends on the terms of your guardianship. You should discuss this with your guardian, Service Coordinator and/or Human Rights Advocate.

**Question:** I live in a group home. Can I still vote?

**Answer:** Yes, people who live in group homes, developmental centers or other types of residential care settings have the right to vote.

**Question:** Do I have to tell my family who I vote for?

**Answer:** The person you vote for is your own personal and private information. You do not have to share this with others, unless you want to.



**Question:** Can I vote for the person I want to win, or should I listen to my staff?

**Answer:** You have the right to vote for whomever you choose. You should never vote for a candidate just because someone else tells you to. You should make your own decision. It's your choice!



**Question:** Can I talk to my friends about the candidates before I vote for one?

**Answer:** If you would like to talk to others about the candidates you are interested in, then this is your right. You can talk to whomever you please, but you don't have to if you don't want to.





## **Section 2: Registration**



## Registering to Vote

The following information comes from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' election information web page:  
<http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/eleifv/howreg.htm>

### **How can I register to vote?**

#### **STEP 1**

Obtain a Massachusetts Mail-in Voter Registration Form. You may find this online or at your city or town hall. You can also request a form be mailed to you by calling 617-727-2828 or 1-800-462-VOTE.

#### **STEP 2**

Fill out the form (the instructions are included on the form)

#### **STEP 3**

Mail the form to your election official at the Board of Registrars or Election Commission within your city or town at least 20 days prior to an election or at least 10 days prior to a special town meeting.

#### **STEP 4**

Wait 2-3 weeks to receive a response. If you do not receive a response, then contact your election official.

## **Who can register to vote?**

A person may register if he or she is:

- a US citizen
- a resident of Massachusetts
- 18 years old on or before election day

## **What should I do if my address changes?**

It is important for the local election office to have your correct address. If you move to a new city or town, then you must re-register before the deadline for the upcoming election so that your name will appear on the list at the correct polling place.

## **Are there deadlines for registration?**

Yes. In order to vote you must be registered:

- **20 days** before all primaries and elections, and/or
- **10 days** before a special town meeting.

## **Do I have to register every year?**

No, you only need to register once, unless you move to a different county or state.

## Do I have to attach identification to my voter registration form?

Yes, if you are registering to vote for the first time in Massachusetts. You may include a **copy** of your identification with your registration (never send original documents...they may not be returned to you). If you do not include identification with your registration form, or if the identification included is not sufficient, you may be asked to provide identification at your polling place.

Acceptable identification must include your name and the address at which you are registered to vote. Acceptable forms of identification include:

- Current and valid Massachusetts driver's license;
- A Massachusetts identification card;
- Current utility bill;
- Bank statement;
- Paycheck;
- Government check;
- Any other government document showing your name and address.



## **What should I do if I don't receive confirmation that I registered to vote?**

If you have NOT received confirmation of your voter status within 2 or 3 weeks from the date you registered please contact your local election office to verify your voting status.



## **What happens once I'm registered?**

If there is an election coming up, and you've met the registration deadline, then you're ready to cast your first ballot! If you would like to know ahead of time what you will be voting on, you can go to your local election office to request a sample ballot. Sample ballots provide the names of all candidates and list the questions you will be asked to vote on.



## **Section 3: Election Day**



## **What do I need to know before I vote?**

- You must be a citizen of the United States
- You must be a resident of the state you are voting in
- You must be registered to vote. You can check the status of your registration by visiting the following web page, and entering your information:  
<http://www.sec.state.ma.us/VoterRegistrationSearch/MyVoteRegStatus.aspx>
- You must have the capacity to make your own decisions
- You cannot be in jail, or on parole/probation for an felony
- You must know where your polling place is located. You can find your polling place on the following web page:  
<http://www.wheredoivotema.com/bal/myelectioninfo.aspx>
- You should learn about the candidates running for office, and other things you will be voting on by visiting the following web page: [www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org)

## **Where do I vote?**

Voting takes place at a polling place. Your polling place depends on where you live, but it is usually within walking distance to your house. A polling place can be in a school, library, church, a community center, or other type of building. You can find your polling place by visiting the following web page, and entering your information:

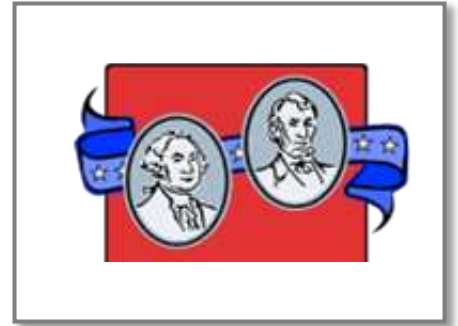
<http://www.wheredoivotema.com/bal/myelectioninfo.aspx>



## When do I vote?

There are different types of elections, which take place at different times throughout the year. During the General Elections, you vote for:

- The President of the United States
- The Governor of the state
- Senators
- Congressmen
- The Mayor of the city or town
- Other county and local officials



The General Election always occurs on the day after the first Monday in November. This is always a Tuesday.

During the Primary Elections, you vote for the person you want to represent your political party in the General Election. Primary elections are held during even-numbered years (e.g., 2012, 2014, 2016) on the day after the first Monday in June. This is always a Tuesday.

## Where can I learn about the candidates?

You can learn lots of information about each candidate by watching the news and reading the newspaper. You can also search for information online. Here are a few helpful websites:

- Project Vote Smart: <http://votesmart.org>
- Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Election Information: <http://www.wheredoivotema.com>
- My Time to Vote: <http://elections.mytimetovote.com/dates/massachusetts.html>

## **What do I need to bring with me on Election Day?**

If this is your first time voting or if you are voting at a new polling place then you will need to bring your identification. If this is not your first time voting, then it is still a good idea to bring your identification just in case you are asked to provide it. You may bring your sample ballot, or any other documents or notes you would like to bring into the voting booth with you, but you must take them with you when you leave.

## **Will I have a hard time getting into the polling place with my wheelchair?**

All polling locations in Massachusetts are required to be fully accessible to people with wheelchairs and other devices. If a polling place is not fully accessible, then you should call: 800-462-VOTE (8683) or 617-727-2828. You may also e-mail: [elections@sec.state.ma.us](mailto:elections@sec.state.ma.us). If you know that you are going to need help, then you can bring someone with you who can help you while you vote. You can also ask a poll worker for assistance.



## **What happens once I arrive at the polling place?**

There may be a line of people waiting to vote. Be prepared to wait in this line. You must check-in at the door by providing your name and address. A poll worker will cross your name off the list and give you a ballot. If this is your first time voting, then you will be asked to provide identification. There will be a number of poll workers available to assist you once you arrive. If you do not know where to go, then find a poll worker and ask for help.



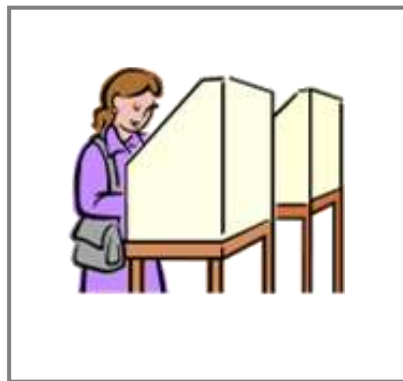
## **What if my name is not on the list at the polling place?**

Make sure you are at the right polling place. Your name will not be on the list if you are at the wrong place. If you are at the right place, and your name is not on the list, then ask for a “provisional ballot.” You can use this to vote, but your vote will only be counted once the state has checked your registration. The state will notify you if your vote was or was not counted.



## **How do I vote?**

Once you check in and receive your ballot, you will go over to one of the voting booths in the room to mark your ballot. By marking your ballot, you are choosing the candidates you want for a particular office. You are also asked to answer “yes” or “no” a number of questions regarding the laws of your state, city or town. Once you have completed your ballot, you must bring it with you to the ballot box. Before depositing your ballot into the box, you must check out by again provide your name and address to the poll worker who will cross you off of the list.



## **What if I need help with my ballot?**

A voter can choose someone to assist entering the polling location, checking in, entering the voting booth, preparing the ballot, exiting the booth and checking out. Massachusetts laws mandate that voting systems be equipped for voters with disabilities allowing everyone to have the same opportunity to vote privately and independently. Each polling place must have at least one accessible voting machine or booth available.

## **What if I can't make it into the polling place, but still want to vote?**

Massachusetts allows for Mail-In voting as well as Early Voting.

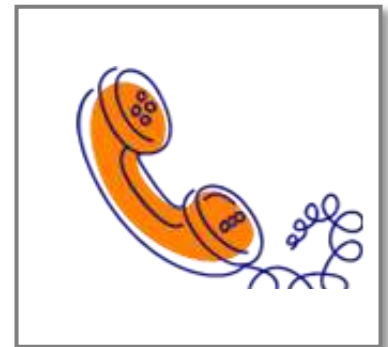
Massachusetts allows voters to vote by what is called an “absentee ballot” if:

- you will be absent from your city or town on election day
- you have a physical disability that prevents your voting at the polling place
- you cannot vote at the polls due to religious beliefs

You may have an absentee ballot mailed to you or you may vote at your city or town hall by making arrangements with your local election official. To be counted, a completed ballot must be received by the time the polls close on Election Day.

### **What if I feel that my rights have been violated on Election Day?**

If you have a problem voting or think your voting rights have been denied, then call (866) OUR-VOTE. There are lawyers available to help answer Election Day questions and any concerns you have. You should also report the issue to the Election Protection Hotline at 866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683).



### **Acknowledgments:**

