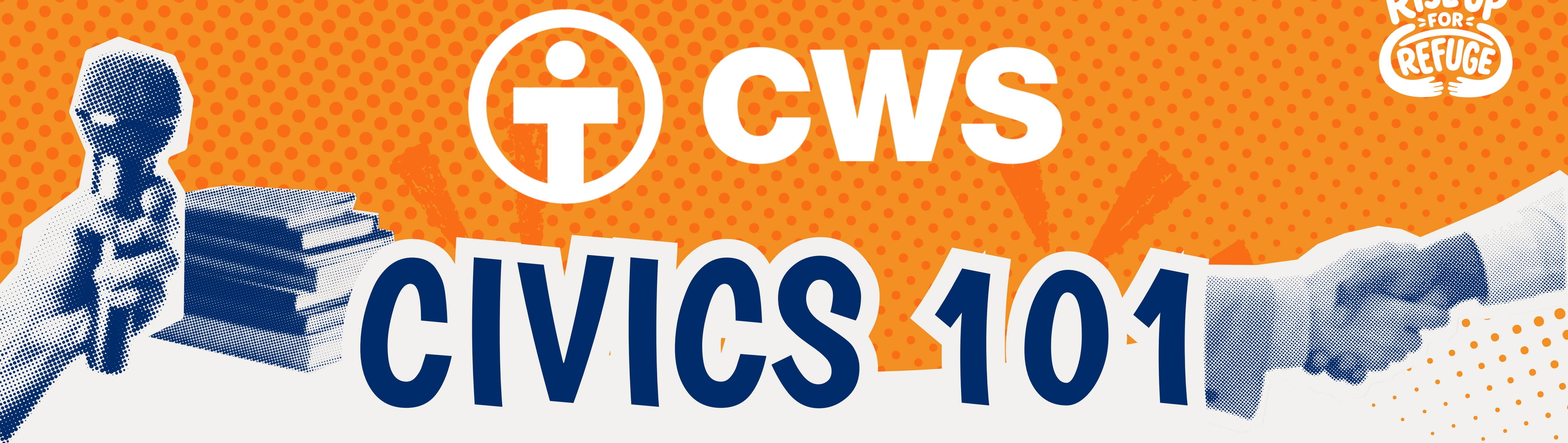




CIVICS 101

Understanding U.S. Elections as a New American Voter

WHAT IS THE U.S. GOVERNMENT?

The United States has three branches of government. Each one has a different job, and they are designed to check and balance each other so no single person or group has too much power.

Congress (the Legislative Branch) writes and passes laws, approves the federal budget, and declares war. Congress has two parts: the Senate and the House of Representatives. Senators are elected every 6 years, and House members are elected every 2 years.

The President (the Executive Branch) carries out the laws, leads the military, and represents the country internationally. The President is elected every 4 years.

The Courts (the Judicial Branch) interpret the laws and make sure they follow the Constitution. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the country. Members of the Supreme Court are nominated by the President and voted on by the Senate.

WHAT ARE MIDTERM ELECTIONS?

The United States holds a major election every two years. Presidential elections happen every four years. The elections that happen in the middle of a president's term — in years like 2026 — are called **midterm elections**.

In midterm elections, voters do not choose a president. Instead, they choose:

- All 435 members of the **U.S. House of Representatives**
- About one-third of the **U.S. Senate** (35 seats in 2026)
- Many **governors, state legislators, and local officials**
- **Judges, school board members, sheriffs, and more**



Midterms matter because Congress controls federal laws including immigration policy, healthcare, education funding, and more. Whoever controls Congress shapes what is possible for the next two years.

HOW DOES YOUR VOTE WORK?

In the United States, your vote is **direct**. When you mark your ballot, your vote is counted. You do not vote through a representative or intermediary you choose directly.

Here is how it works:

- 1** You **register to vote** at your home address. Every state has its own rules and deadlines.
- 2** You **receive a ballot** that lists every race in your area from the U.S. Senate all the way down to the local school board.
- 3** You **mark your choices** in private. No one can see how you voted.
- 4** Your **ballot is counted**. The candidate with the most votes wins most races. (Some states, like Georgia, require a candidate to win more than 50% if no one does, a runoff election is held.)
- 5** The **winner takes office** and represents you whether you voted for them or not.

WHO IS ON YOUR BALLOT?

Your ballot depends on where you live. Most voters will see races for:

FEDERAL OFFICES

They represent you in Washington D.C.

A **U.S. Senator** serves 6 years, represents your whole state

A **U.S. Representative** serves 2 years, represents your congressional district

STATE OFFICES

They make laws for your state.

Governor is the chief executive of your state

Your **state senator** and **state representative** pass state laws on education, housing, healthcare, and more.

LOCAL OFFICES

They make decisions closest to your daily life.

Mayor and **City Council** they run your city, including the appointment of local police chief

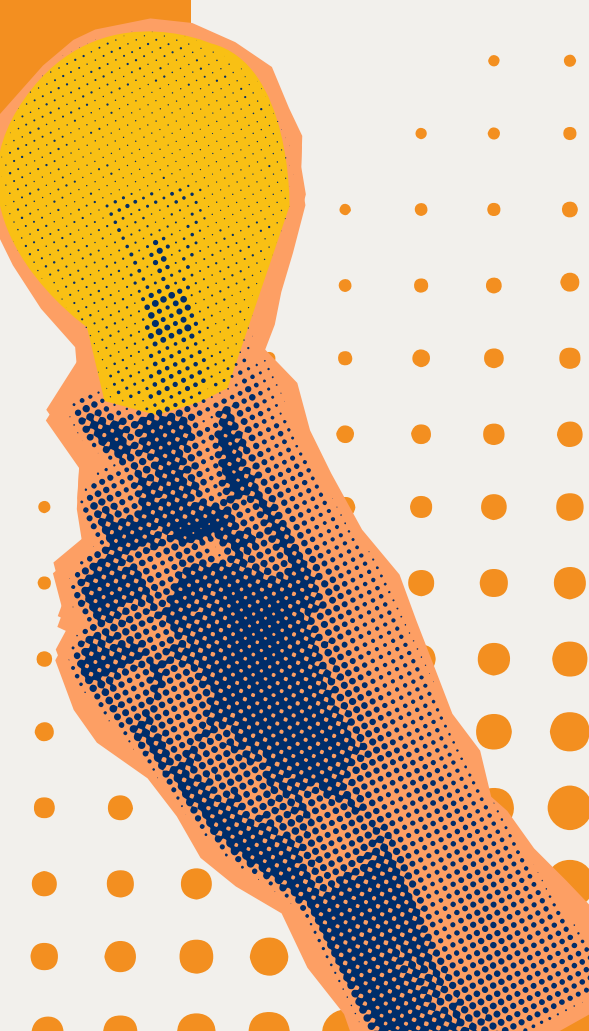
County commissioners they run your county

Sheriff runs local law enforcement

School board member oversees public schools

District attorney decides which crimes are prosecuted locally

Note: Local offices often affect New American communities most directly including in how local law enforcement interacts with federal immigration authorities.



WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

Many new voters are surprised to learn that the U.S. has three layers of government and each one makes different decisions that impact our lives in different ways.

LEVEL	EXAMPLES OF WHAT THEY DECIDE
Federal (National)	Immigration law, Social Security, Medicare, military, national border policy
State	Driver's licenses, in-state college tuition, state police, Medicaid expansion, voting rules
Local (County/City)	Public schools, libraries, local police and sheriff, parks, water, housing codes, trash pick up, local road repairs.

This means that decisions affecting your family may come from any level and elections at every level matter.

WHAT IS THE CONSTITUTION?

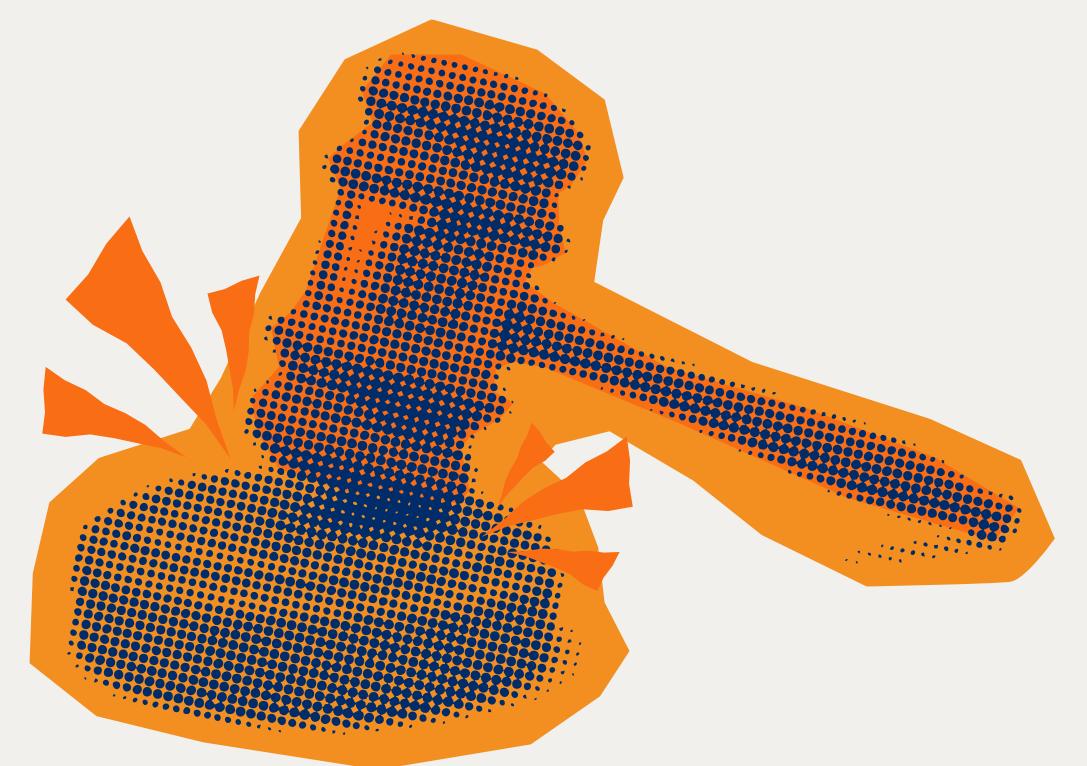
The U.S. Constitution is the supreme law of the land. It was written in 1787 and sets the rules for how the government works. It cannot be changed easily; any change (called an **amendment**) requires approval from Congress and most states.

The first ten amendments are called the **Bill of Rights**. They protect basic freedoms for everyone in the United States, not just citizens. These include freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to a fair trial, and protection from unreasonable searches.

The **14th Amendment** added after the Civil War guarantees equal protection under the law for all persons in the United States.

HOW ARE LAWS MADE?

1. A member of Congress proposes a bill (an idea for a law)
2. Both the House and the Senate must vote to pass it
3. The President signs it into law or vetoes (rejects) it
4. Congress can override a veto with a two-thirds majority vote
5. Courts can strike down a law if it violates the Constitution



This process is designed to be slow on purpose so that no one person or group can rush through a law without broad agreement.

YOUR RIGHTS AS A VOTER

Once you are a U.S. citizen and registered to vote, you have the right to:

- ☐ Vote in private no one may pressure or watch you
- ☐ Receive help in your language if your community qualifies under federal law
- ☐ Bring a person of your choice to assist you in the voting booth
- ☐ Cast a provisional ballot if your name is not on the voter list
- ☐ Take your time, there is no rush while voting
- ☐ Report problems to election workers or call 866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683)

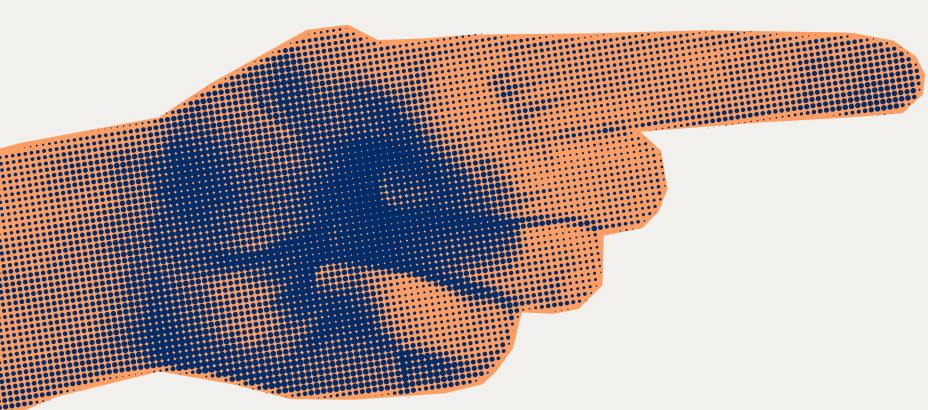


Election Protection Hotline:



866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683)

This line is free to call and available in multiple languages.



QUICK RECAP:

- Midterm elections are every two years, in even-numbered years.
- Presidential elections are every four years.
- Local elections often happen in odd-numbered years, check your county.
- You must re-register if you move or change your name.
- Voter registration deadlines are different in every state.

NEED HELP OR HAVE QUESTIONS?

Your CWS civic engagement team is here to help! Find more resources at
www.CWSGlobal.org/Rise-Up/

CHECK YOUR VOTER REGISTRATION:



connects to: www.weall.vote/CWS

This is a nonpartisan civic education resource. CWS Global and our Rise Up for Refuge campaign do not endorse any candidate or political party.

KEY WORDS TO KNOW

Ballot	The form you use to cast your votes
Primary election	An election held before the general election where each party chooses its candidate
General election	The main election where voters choose between party nominees and independents
Runoff election	A second election held when no candidate wins enough votes the first time (required in some states like Georgia).
Incumbent	A candidate who already holds the office they are running for (they're running for re-election)
Nonpartisan	Not affiliated with or favoring any political party
Precinct	Your assigned local voting area
Provisional ballot	A backup ballot used when there is a question about your eligibility; it is counted after your eligibility is confirmed.
Electoral College	The system used only for presidential elections (not midterms) where each state casts a set number of electoral votes based on its population

This is a nonpartisan civic education resource. Rise Up for Refuge and CWS do not endorse any candidate or political party.