



The Rules Have Changed: Elections 2012

By Lianne Campodonico, LWVC Voter Service Director

There are significant changes for the 2012 elections. The Top Two primary system will be used in June, online voter registration could be up and running in the summer, and redistricting means that many voters will see different names on the ballot and/or new district lines and numbers. This is the time for voters to do their homework and avoid confusion at the ballot box. You can keep in touch with the latest election information by going to League of Women Voter websites, including SmartVoter.org and CAVotes.org.

Redistricting

With the new state district maps drawn by the Citizens Redistricting Commission last year for Congressional, state Senate, Assembly and Board of Equalization districts, many voters will find themselves in a new electoral geography with new district boundaries for the upcoming election cycle. Some voters in the state will see unfamiliar names listed on their ballot as incumbents; for some there will be no incumbents running; others will see multiple incumbents listed on their ballots for a single contest. For example, there are three dozen new districts in the state with no incumbents living in them. In the Los Angeles area, there are five newly drawn districts with two incumbents sharing the same district. To learn more, see the CAVotes redistricting update:

<http://cavotes.org/issues/redistricting-implementation>. There you will find links to the new maps for Assembly, state Senate, and Congressional districts, as well as important information about the challenges to the new redistricting maps that may affect implementation at election time.

Top Two Primary System

There are actually two primary elections taking place on June 5, 2012: a) the Presidential Primary, which is a partisan party nomination process used to select candidates for President and county central committees and b) the statewide Top Two Primary elections for congressional and state elective offices. The Presidential Primary produces “party-nominated candidates” for president who then appear on the November General Election ballot by party. This is the type of primary that California voters are used to. The Top Two primary system, however, produces two “voter-nominated candidates” who have received the two highest vote counts and who then advance to the November General Election. Even if one of the candidates receives more than 50 percent of the votes, there is still a “runoff” between the top two vote getters. With the Top Two Primary system, all candidates running for an office are listed on one ballot, regardless of their party preference. All voters may vote for any candidate in the list.

Here are some of the special features of balloting in the Top Two system that need to be understood by the voters:

- The Top Two system was placed on the June 2010 ballot by the legislature as a result of state budget negotiations and was passed by the voters.

- Voters will not see a “straight party ticket” on the ballot, but rather a list of names for the different contests with each candidate’s party preference indicated. However, a candidate for a voter-nominated office may choose not to have his or her party preference—as disclosed on their most recent affidavit of registration—indicated on the ballot.
- It is possible for two voter-nominated candidates with the same party affiliation to appear on the November ballot.
- Political parties may endorse candidates in the Top Two primary. Sample ballots must include a section listing these party endorsements.
- Although votes may be cast for write-in candidates in the Top Two primary election, no write-in votes are allowed in the November general election for the Top Two contests.

As of this writing, there are court challenges to the Top Two Primary system currently pending, based on the ban on write-in votes in the General Election for Top Two offices and on constitutional issues of third party access to the ballot and voters’ right of choice.

For frequently asked questions about the primary elections in California, you can go to this link on the Secretary of State’s website: <http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/2012-elections/june-primary/faqs-primary-2012.htm> .

May 21, 2012 is the last day to register to vote in the June 5, 2012 primary elections.

Online Voter Registration

The Secretary of State would like to see Californians able to register to vote online sometime in the summer of 2012, in time for the November General Election. In October the Governor signed into law SB 397 (Yee) that allows the state to begin registering voters online before the completion of a planned new statewide voter registration database. State elections officials and the Department of Motor Vehicles are currently working on the technical details of using DMV digitized signatures for matching registrations submitted online.

The League, along with many other good government groups, has long supported online voter registration as a way of allowing more people to participate in elections and of protecting against fraudulent paper registration. Online registrants will be required to provide their birthdate, the number from their valid California driver’s license or California ID card, *and* the last four digits of their social security number. Dean Logan, Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, has called this development “a game changer.” In the last statewide election in Los Angeles County, his office received 64,000 registration affidavits the day after the deadline. He was certain that if online registration had been in force, many more people would have voted in that election.