

## **FORM OVER SUBSTANCE: A UNIFORM BALLOT FOR UNIQUE STATES**

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Before gerrymandering, voter turnout, and voter dilution, the voting process must present itself to citizens in some way. The ballot is the civic form that brings citizens most important duty, voting, to life. But the ballot itself comes in enough colors, layouts, pages, fonts, and flavors to make a citizen sick. A single uniform ballot for the presidential election would reduce confusion and fear towards voting, unify American voters by creating a shared voting form, and ease administrative challenges for the largest voting event in the country. Speaking about America's complex ballots, [one famous political scientist](#) remarked that "the voter very often defeats the ends he really wishes to attain." Those words spoken in the 1920s feel all too familiar in the 2020s. Why is the American ballot the antithesis of easy? The ballot is a sacred page of paper, a tangible entryway into the democratic process. A single presidential ballot is the civic form Americans deserve.

The [earliest paper ballots](#), called party tickets, were usually handwritten by the voter and listed candidates associated with a single political party. The overall voting process was originally a public experience, occurring in a highly visible setting like a town square. Onlookers could watch voters write down candidates and place the ballot into a ballot box. As the United States grew and the electorate expanded in the wake of the Civil War, the biggest ballot change occurred when [America copied the Australian approach](#) and implemented the blanket ballot or "Australian ballot." The Australian ballot meant that a voter would walk into a poll booth, draw a curtain, and anonymously vote on a paper ballot that listed candidates for all parties. This newly private process aimed directly at minimizing voter intimidation, blackmailing, and vote buying.

Since [citizens owned and created](#) the first paper ballot, the adoption of the Australian ballot was a trade-off—in exchange for providing secrecy and more efficient voting, the state assumed voter administration. Similar to modern [electioneering](#), when state law did not clarify the voting rules, the rest was left to the locality, resulting in various ballot forms and styles. With different forms and styles came the potential for voter confusion and fraud. Today, the federal government provides some minimum election standards through acts like the [National Voter Registration Act \(“Motor Voter law”\)](#) and the [Help America Vote Act \(“HAVA”\)](#), but [states still run most of the show](#). State election laws typically specify the dimensions and thickness of the paper, access to run on the ballot, the font type and size to be used, what content to display on the ballot, and budgeting for ballot printing.

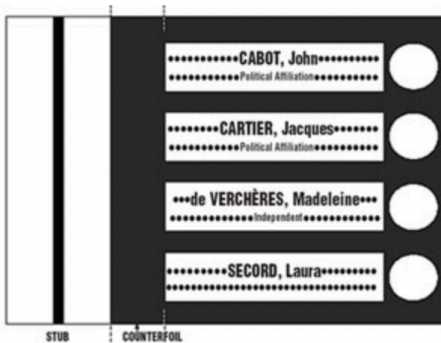
States argue that their power to administer elections serves as a [representative democracy](#) safeguard. The democratic process has expanded to include more participants, including men and women of all races. As the country grew, so did the processes and procedures required to meet America’s growing administrative needs. States experiment with everything from offices, commissioners, polling places, and printers. While consensus cannot be easily reached on the national level to deliver on administering elections, the states play an important role by providing unique and workable solutions to the complex issues involved in delivering our democracy to citizens.

Different election administration procedures also hedge against security risks by diversifying the voting process of each state. And diversify they do. Depending on local government makeup of each state, accountability for American elections rests in the hands of upwards of [13,000 sovereign counties and municipalities](#). A uniform ballot design, at least for the presidential election, will not strip states of any significant independence, nor create an

outbreak of election administration challenges. On the contrary, providing a standard template for the ballot will ease the states administrative burden during the presidential election by streamlining ballot creation, securing more efficient printing, reducing training efforts and resources, and most importantly, helping states make voting easier for their citizens. States will retain a myriad of ways to achieve diverse administrative procedures. Tallying, poll operations, voting technologies, and state oversight for voter administration all but ensure different state routes to election day.

Other countries are not like this...and these countries are just fine. [Australia](#), [Canada](#), and other [EU countries](#) all use a uniform ballot design for their largest elections. Admittedly, countries govern elections under different legal frameworks. Inherent differences such as nonpartisan election leadership, accountability mechanisms, and strength of the right to vote also bear on election administration. But Canada provides a useful [case study](#) because their elections began around the same time as the United States and faced similar problems as a developed Western democracy. Canada achieved voter administration uniformity through its nonpartisan oversight agency, [Elections Canada](#). The agency is comprised of public servants, independent from partisan politics, to oversee and ensures fair elections. Their ballot design is thoughtful, simple, and straightforward.

## Regular Paper Ballot



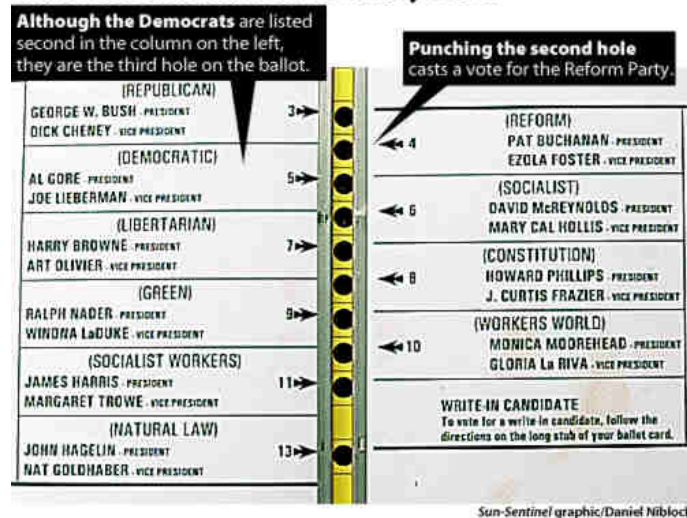
[Text version of "Regular Paper Ballot"](#)

The election ballot lists the names of the candidates in alphabetical order along with each one's political affiliation, unless they choose to have either "Independent" or no affiliation under their name.

The voter takes the ballot behind the voting screen and makes a clear mark in the circle beside the preferred name.

In contrast to Canada's streamlined ballot, the [2000 Bush v. Gore](#) presidential election revealed a fundamental problem in the American ballot. Florida lacked a clear standard for what constituted a valid vote. Unfortunately, bad ballot design is [not unique](#) to Florida, but the controversial election pushed the American election system to the brink and Florida was just the tipping point. The infamous butterfly ballot design created [mass confusion](#) and frustration. The complicated ballot design left voters confused about how to select their preferred candidate and election officials confused about how to re-tally the votes. When a Florida citizen voted in 2000, their candidate selection "punched" a center hole to demark their vote. The hole punch acted as the official record of the vote. But each punch left varying degrees of holes or "hanging chads," which confused officials during the heavily scrutinized recount.

## Confusion over Palm Beach County ballot



Canada does not have these ballot disputes. The clean, straightforward design helps voters unambiguously select their preferred candidate and voting officials determine a valid vote. The design is intuitive enough for a child to figure out. Canada's uniform national ballot also equips every citizen with the same clear expectation of what they will need to do come election day. Instead of exerting energy trying to interpret the ballot and feeling panicked or nervous during voting, Canada makes civic responsibility easier by making the form easy to fill out. Additionally, since 1874, Canada established the practice that judges [resolve disputed procedures](#). So, while many electoral disputes in Canada were largely resolved by the 1920s, America was just starting to wonder why our ballot was so confusing. Compared to the United States, Canada's uniform ballot keeps recount fiascos at bay by setting a clear standard and further supports citizens by relieving confusion for how to carry out their important civic duty.

American citizens want to see [more political reform](#), and transitioning to a uniform presidential ballot is an area that requires minimal effort and provides maximum benefits. The ballot serves two basic purposes: to cast and to count. When a citizen casts a vote, the ballot communicates the candidate information and allows the voter to express their preferred candidate. Once cast, the state then counts the vote to decide a winner. The presidential election

is an ideal campaign to adopt a uniform ballot because it requires the same, minimal information for everyone.

A presidential ballot need only include top candidates, party affiliations, a potential write-in, and instructions. Of course, there is [room to debate](#) the content and design of a ballot, but there are common sense solutions too. A [2020 resource from the Brennan Center for Justice](#) outlined the most common ballot design flaws with proposals for how to fix them. Tension about ballot content and design, such as who will appear first, will exist no matter what. But a uniform ballot at least puts citizens ahead of an endless political debate.

Surprisingly, with ample political discussion around voting issues in America, hardly any literature or political action touches on how a uniform ballot could help our democracy. Yet ample discussion exists around the science of [effective design and communication](#) in a variety of other contexts. After the 2000 election proved how ballot design [impacts democracy](#), Congress issued new laws like HAVA to improve overall voter administration. But Americans are still left with a patchwork of ballot designs that feel closer to the citizen experience from over 100 years ago.

While fantasies of an online voting experience may resonate in the digital era, paper ballots are still the best option. Data privacy, data integrity, and risk of data breach are some of the main reasons that [the ballot hesitates to go digital](#). The [2016 election](#) and [2020 election](#) crystalized the fear of hacking, security gaps, and release of anonymous voting information that keeps a digital voting experience in the foreground for now. A 2022 [Reuters report](#) also showed that most Americans still vote on a paper ballot today, so working towards a uniform paper ballot would build familiarity and comfort with a standard design until the time for a digital experience arrives. A [Caltech/MIT report](#) showed that the paper ballot is also the most accurate and least

susceptible to cheating, further spotlighting the gains to be won in adopting a uniform presidential ballot in the paper form first.

Focusing on a uniform presidential ballot allows states to continue safeguarding the vast majority of election administration and may inspire states to adopt simpler procedures along the way. Of course, switching to a standard presidential ballot will not happen by the swish of the hand. A ballot reform proposal might look something like a twelve-year plan. A slower paced rollout will spread accountability between multiple presidents to reduce backlash and show a sign of good faith in the political system. The longer timeline would allow for ample testing and auditing so administrators can adjust the ballot to unique American needs.

Transitioning to a uniform presidential ballot would be a win for democracy. To do so would alleviate obvious and latent burdens that plague American citizens, presidential candidates, and election administrators alike. Election administration leaders can involve communication and design experts to ensure a thoughtful ballot design and learn from other countries like Canada who have already succeeded in a uniform design. A unified voting experience, at least by form, eliminates fear, hesitation, and confusion amongst citizens, and can ultimately improve the voter experience and voter participation. To vote is to exercise a vital civic power as an American citizen. Imagine calling your friend after voting in the 2024 presidential election. Even if you had differing politics, you could each take comfort in knowing how the most important piece of the voting experience appeared in your town, their town, and every town in America, because for once, every American would be on the same page.