

Want to vote for president in California but bewildered by the changing rules? We've got you.

Four things to know before you vote — no matter what the internet says.

BY BEN CHRISTOPHER / JANUARY 10, 2020

If you're confused about how to vote in California's presidential primary, you're in good company with Susan Sarandon.

At the beginning of January, the "Thelma and Louise" actress and Sanders enthusiast issued a public service announcement on Twitter: "California voters: make sure to switch from independent to democrat (sic) in order to vote for @BernieSanders."

Just one problem: She's wrong. Political independents (known in California election parlance as "no party preference" voters) do not need to switch parties to vote in the Democratic presidential primary — they just need to request a Democratic ballot first.

Technically, Sarandon was retweeting the account @TimOnTheTractor — but Tim (presumably) doesn't have an Academy Award. He also doesn't have 653,000 Twitter followers to misinform.

To be fair, the minutiae of California election law is really confusing! And Sarandon is hardly alone. Election day in California is March 3, but already social media has become a bipartisan chorus of wrongness about the what, how and why of the state's presidential primary.

If you're unsure about how to get the ballot you want, why things here are so complicated or what presidential primaries are all about, here are four things to know before you vote:

The presidential primary will not use the familiar "Top Two" ballot

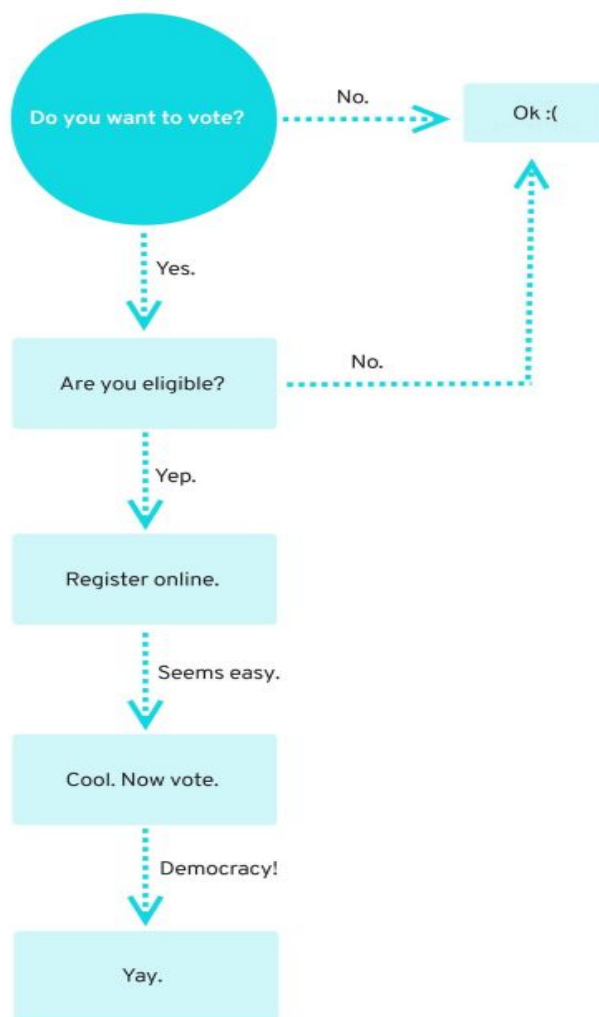
California voters can be forgiven for assuming that political party registration doesn't really matter.

In 2010 voters backed a measure to create the state's nonpartisan "top two" election system, in which all primary voters fill out a ballot with every candidate on it — regardless of either the voter's or the candidate's political party. The top two winners then move on to the general election ballot — even if they're both from the same party.

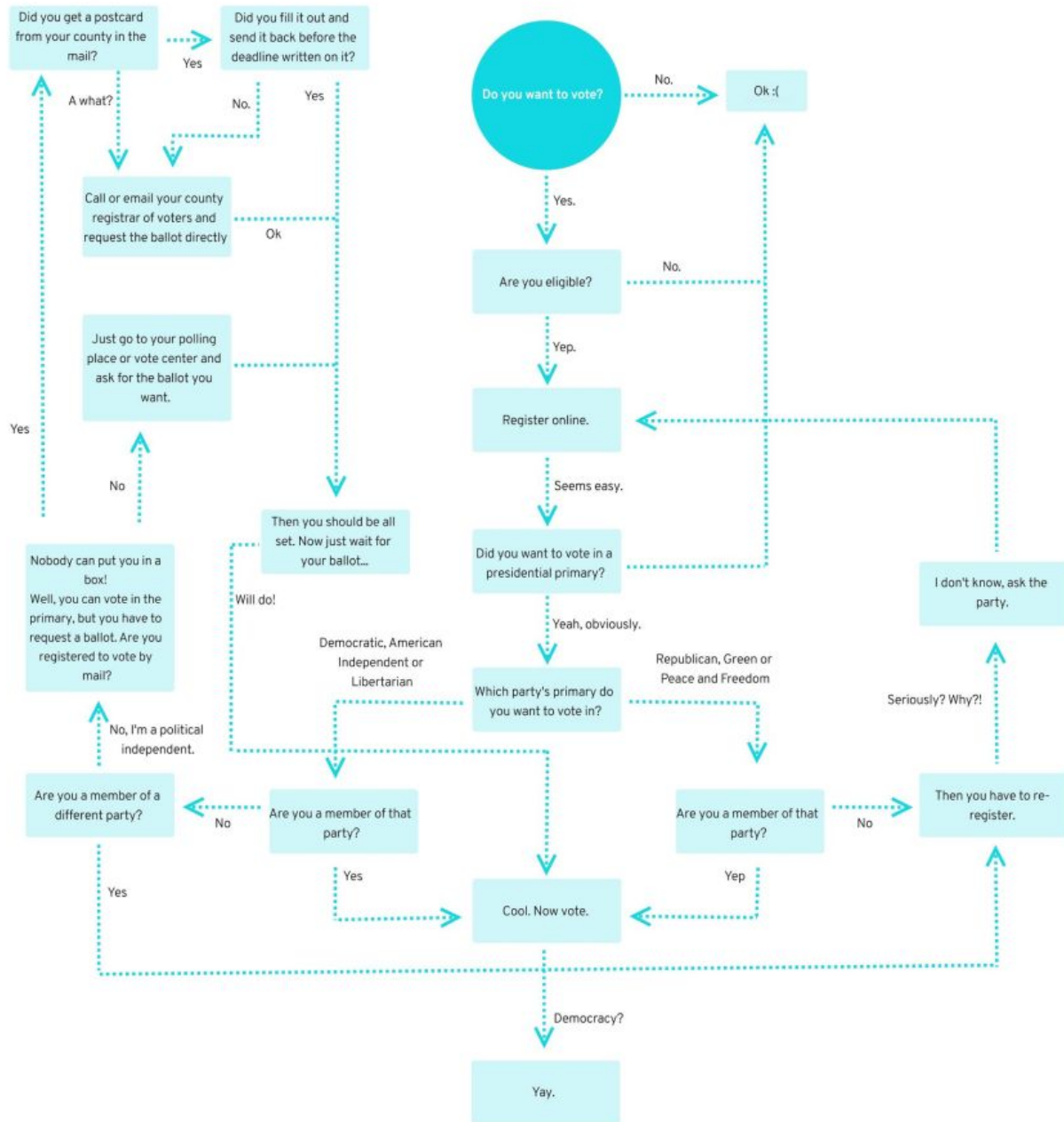
In races for state legislative and congressional seats, the top two method will still reign on the 2020 ballot.

But when you vote in the presidential primary, it's back to the old partisan system: Democrats on the Democratic ballot, Republicans on the Republican ballot, and so on.

So while voting in California usually goes like this under the top two:



In the presidential primary, it looks a little more like this:



No Party Preference voters: Pay attention!

Registered Democrats, Republicans, Greens, Libertarians and other party members, rest assured. You are guaranteed a primary ballot with all of your party's presidential contenders on it.

But voters who don't belong to a political party — the fastest growing voting bloc in the state — will have to navigate a more daunting set of obstacles to cast a presidential primary vote.

Some parties have "members only" policies:

- The Republican Party
- The Green Party
- The Peace and Freedom Party

If you want to vote in one of these three primaries, you'll have to join that party. You can't do it as a member of any other party, or even as a "no party preference" independent. No exceptions.

The following three parties do allow political independents to cast ballots in their presidential primaries (though not members of other parties):

- The Democratic Party
- The Libertarian Party
- The American Independent Party (which is the party's name and not to be confused with being a party-less political independent)

But — and this is an important caveat — these voters do have to specifically request the ballot they want.

For those who vote in person, this is a cinch. Just go into your polling place when it's time to vote and ask. But independents who vote by mail need to let your county know which ballot they want ahead of time.

Maybe you received a postcard that looks like this:

Voter Name _____ Voter ID _____
Voter ID Bar code _____

I am not registered with a qualified political party. However, I hereby request the following ballot for the March 3, 2020, Presidential Primary Election.

CHECK ONE

☐ American Independent Party

☐ Democratic Party

☐ Libertarian Party

☐ No Party Preference – No partisan contest, including President

Signature Date

IMPORTANT:

Return postcard by January 3, 2020. Ballots will be mailed after February 3, 2020

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If so, fill it out and mail it back. If you missed the deadline or lost the card, and you're not going to vote in person, email or call your county registrar's office and let them know which ballot you want. You can find the contact information [here](#).

And if you've already received a ballot in the mail and were disappointed by the lack of presidential candidates, do not fill it out. You can always request a new ballot, but trying to vote twice is frowned upon — and also punishable as "[voter fraud](#)."

The California Secretary of State's office has an [all-in-one website](#) where you can check your registration status, register or change your party affiliation online, and learn more about the presidential primary.

You can make registration changes online through February 18. After that, you'll have to do it in person — which you can do up to and even on Election Day itself.

15 counties are doing things a little differently this time

If you live in one of the counties highlighted below, voting might look a little different this year.

In 2016, California passed the "Voter Choice Act," a law aimed at modernizing the state's election system, such that:

- Every registered voter gets a ballot in the mail
- Voters are no longer required to go to a specific polling place, but can vote at any number of voting centers or drop-off points
- Voters can cast their ballots in person beginning 11 days before, and up to and including, Election Day

In 2018, five counties (Madera, Napa, Nevada, Sacramento, and San Mateo) [rolled out the new system](#). This year, 10 more will join their ranks. That's fifteen counties in all containing 49% of the state population.

This is key for "no party preference" voters living in these counties who may not get the ballot they want in the mail. See the previous section for details.

Delegate math can be complicated

In state legislative races, the electoral calculations are straightforward: The two candidates who earned the most votes, regardless of party, move on to the final voting round in November.

But the math is trickier in the presidential primary: citizen votes are used to select party convention delegates, who then select the party's nominee for the White House.

Let's focus on the Democratic contest, which is bound to be the most interesting one. Nationwide there will be 4,532 Democratic delegates, 495 come from California.

In the Golden State, presidential hopefuls can earn delegates three ways:

- By winning a large share of the statewide vote.
- By winning a large share of the vote in any one of the state's 53 congressional districts.
- By successfully schmoozing party leaders.

The 144 statewide delegates are awarded in proportion to a candidate's performance across the state — up to a point. To take a [recent polling average](#) from FiveThirtyEight as a hypothetical election result, if Joe Biden wins 23% of the California vote, he would win the support of *at least* 23% of those statewide delegates.

Why “at least”? Party rules require candidates to demonstrate a baseline level of electoral viability: they only earn delegates if they win at least 15% of the vote.

Only three candidates exceed that threshold in the polls: Biden with 23%, Sen. Bernie Sanders with 22% and Sen. Elizabeth Warren with 17%. By that math, Biden would get 36% of the delegates because he earned 36% of the primary vote split just among the candidates who exceeded the benchmark.

Another 272 delegates are awarded by congressional district. That gives candidates who have strong support in a particular region of the state an opportunity to earn delegates even if they don't perform well overall.

But not all districts are created equal. The Democratic Party assigns between 4 and 7 delegates to each district depending on the number of Democratic voters who live and vote there. Thus, San Francisco gets 7, while the state's rural, conservative northeastern district gets 4.

For these delegates, the proportional logic is the same but at a smaller scale: delegates are divvied up among candidates who earn more than 15% of the vote in each district.

The last 79 delegates are composed of the party elite — people like Gov. Gavin Newsom, the state's sitting members of Congress, the top members of the state party. They automatically get a spot at the convention. They're also "superdelegates," meaning they can vote for whomever they want.

But superdelegates don't have as much power as they used to, thanks to a post-2016 change in the party rules designed to wrest some control from the party establishment. When regular delegates first vote for the nominee at their convention in Milwaukee next July, super-delegates will have to sit out the vote. It's only if a candidate doesn't win a majority of delegate votes outright in the first round do the superdelegates then get to weigh in.

The last time that happened: 1952.

[https://calmatters.org/projects/california-2020-presidential-primary-voting-rules-register-democrat-republican-independent/?utm_source=CalMatters+Newsletters&utm_campaign=428a1842d0-WHATMATTERS NEWSLETTER&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_faa7be558d-428a1842d0-150206769&mc_cid=428a1842d0&mc_eid=321f0afa09](https://calmatters.org/projects/california-2020-presidential-primary-voting-rules-register-democrat-republican-independent/?utm_source=CalMatters+Newsletters&utm_campaign=428a1842d0-WHATMATTERS%20NEWSLETTER&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_faa7be558d-428a1842d0-150206769&mc_cid=428a1842d0&mc_eid=321f0afa09)