Introduction to Federal Statutory Research

The United States Code contains federal laws that are currently in force, arranged by subject. As a general rule, you should use the U.S. Code when researching or citing federal statutory law.


The U.S. Code is divided into titles numbered 1 through 50. Each title covers a different subject area. Titles are subdivided into chapters and sections; sometimes, subtitles and subchapters are also used. When citing to a U.S. Code section, give the title and section number, as well as the year of the volume you’re citing from. Here’s an example of a citation to the official version: 42 U.S.C. § 15481 (2006). In this citation, 42 is the title number and 15481 is the section number.

This handout will explain how to find code sections using the U.S.C.A. in print, the U.S.C.A. on Westlaw, and the U.S.C.S. on Lexis. (The U.S.C.S. is also available in print and is comparable to the print U.S.C.A.)

Using the U.S.C.A. in Print

Finding a Code Section When You Have a Citation

The print copies of the U.S. Code are located on the law library’s first floor, in the low shelves adjacent to the first floor reading room lounge.
To find 42 U.S.C. § 15481, look at the title and section numbers on the spines of the volumes.

Once you’ve located the correct volume, go to section 15481. The section numbers run consecutively through the title.

At the end of the code section, in parentheses, you’ll see the history of that code section: citation(s) to the session law(s) that created and amended the code section. Session laws are another type of publication format for statutory law. Section 15481 was created by Public Law 107-252 in 2002 and has not been amended. We’ll take a closer look at session laws in the spring semester.

§ 15481. Voting systems standards

(a) Requirements
   Each voting system used in an election for Federal office shall meet the following requirements:

   (1) In general
       (A) Except as provided in subparagraph (B), the voting system (including any lever voting system, optical scanning voting system, or direct recording electronic system) shall—

   . . .

(d) Effective date
   Each State and jurisdiction shall be required to comply with the requirements of this section on and after January 1, 2006.
Below the history information you'll see historical and statutory notes and annotations. The annotations consist of cross-references to secondary sources and summaries of court decisions that have interpreted the code section.

**HISTORICAL AND STATUTORY NOTES**

**Revision Notes and Legislative Reports**

**References in Text**

**LIBRARY REFERENCES**

**American Digest System**
Elections 126(6), 222.
Key Number System Topic No. 144.

**Research References**

**Encyclopedias**

**Notes of Decisions**

1. **Accessibility**

   Disadvantaged voters failed to show likelihood of success on merits of claim against California's Secretary of State, under Help America Vote Act (HAVA) section requiring, by January 1, 2006, at least one direct recording electronic (DRE) voting system or other voting system equipped for individuals with disabilities at each polling place, as would support preliminary injunction against Secretary's directives which de-certified and withdrew approval of use of certain DREs, where voters had no evidence that California counties would not be able to offer voters with disabilities accessible voting equipment if directives were followed. American Ass'n of People with Disabilities v. Shelley, C.D. Cal. 2004, 324 P.Supp.2d 1120. Injunction 138.51

**Updating**

Each volume of the U.S.C.A. is updated by an annual supplement. This can be found in a pocket at the back of the volume (known as a pocket part) or in a separate softbound volume shelved next to the main volume. You should check the supplement to see if the code section has been amended or if any new annotations have been added since the main volume was printed.

At the end of the U.S.C.A. set, you may see one or more softbound pamphlets that update the annual supplements.

**Finding a Code Section Using the Index**

If you don't already have a citation to a code section, you can find code sections using the index at the end of the U.S.C.A. set.
If you were looking for a code section on standards for voting machines, the index would point you to 42 U.S.C. § 15481 et seq. (Et seq. means “and following”; i.e., you should look at section 15481 and the sections following it.)

**ELECTIONS—Cont’d**

Voting machines,
Certificates and certification, 42 § 15371
Grants, tests, 42 § 15451 et seq.
Guidelines, 42 § 15361 et seq.
House of Representatives, 2 § 9
Improvements, 42 § 15301 et seq.
Research, grants, 42 § 15441 et seq.
Standards, 42 § 15481 et seq.
Studies, 42 § 15381 et seq.
Tests, 42 § 15371

*Finding a Code Section by Browsing*

Another method of finding code sections is to browse the tables of contents to the code. It’s a good idea to use this technique in addition to the index to make sure you’re not overlooking relevant sections. The index can give you some starting points and the tables of contents can show you other sections nearby that might also be relevant.

At the beginning of each volume of the U.S.C.A., you’ll see a table of contents that lists all the chapters in the title. You can see below that in Title 42, Chapter 146 covers Election Administration Improvement. Note that the section numbers run consecutively through the title; i.e., they don’t start over again with each new chapter. For this reason, you don’t need to provide the chapter number when citing to a code section.
At the beginning of Chapter 146, you’ll see a list of the subchapters and sections for that chapter. You can see that section 15481 covers standards for voting machines, but the other sections in that subchapter are also relevant. Sometimes you must read several sections together to understand Congress’ intent.

CHAPTER 146—ELECTION ADMINISTRATION IMPROVEMENT

SUBCHAPTER III—UNIFORM AND NONDISCRIMINATORY ELECTION TECHNOLOGY AND ADMINISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

Using the Popular Name Table

Some laws passed by Congress are known by popular names—e.g., the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Freedom of Information Act. To find one of these acts in the code, use the Popular Name Table at the end of the U.S.C.A. set. This table lists the names of acts in alphabetical order and provides citations to the relevant session laws and code sections.

Below you can see the entry for the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Act was first enacted by Public Law 89-110 and has been amended many times, mostly recently by Public Law 110-258. References to the U.S. Code are in parentheses. By browsing the table of contents around 42 USC § 1971, you can get a clearer picture of how the Voting Rights Act has been arranged in the code.
Using the U.S.C.A on Westlaw

Finding a Code Section When You Have a Citation

Enter the citation in the “Find by citation” box.
Finding a Code Section Using the Index

Statutes Index

Selected Databases

United States Code Annotated (USCA)
Finding a Code Section by Browsing

Go to the USCA’s table of contents and expand the table by clicking on the “+” signs.

Finding a Code Section with a Full-Text Search

An example of a search that would retrieve section 15481 is TEXT(VOTING /5 MACHINE SYSTEM AND STANDARD REQUIREMENT). The “TEXT” field limits the search to the text of the code sections; this excludes language in the notes and annotations and cuts down on the number of false hits you retrieve. You can see a list of the available fields by clicking on the drop-down menu below the search box.

The connector /5 searches for terms within five words of each other. In Westlaw, words with no connectors between them default to an OR search. In this search, SYSTEM and REQUIREMENT are used
as synonyms for *MACHINE* and *STANDARD*, respectively. Using synonyms helps you retrieve as many relevant code sections as possible. In Westlaw and Lexis, regular plural forms of the terms you enter are automatically included in the search, so this search will also pick up *systems* or *machines*.

**Using the Popular Name Table**

To browse the Popular Name Table on Westlaw, select the Popular Name Table’s “Table of Contents.” This will display an alphabetical list of acts.

Westlaw’s version of the Popular Name Table tells you where each section of the act can be found in the code. Further down the page, you’ll see a list of the laws that amended the act.
Using the U.S.C.S. on Lexis

Finding a Code Section When You Have a Citation

Click on the “Get a Document” tab and enter the citation.
Finding a Code Section by Browsing

To browse, click on “United States Code Service.” An expandable table of contents will be displayed. Note that Lexis does not have an online index for the U.S.C.S.
Finding a Code Section with a Full-Text Search

To see all the search options available for a full-text search of the U.S.C.S., go to the “Advanced” search page.

“Segments” on Lexis are comparable to “fields” on Westlaw. You can see a list of the available segments on a drop-down menu. In Lexis, words with no connectors between them are read as a phrase, so you need to insert OR connectors between synonyms.
Using the Popular Name Table

To access the Popular Name Table on Lexis, go to Federal Legal → United States Code Service Materials → USCS Popular Names Table.

On Lexis, the format of the Popular Names Table is essentially the same as the print version. This entry for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 shows that it was first enacted by Public Law 89-110 and has been amended many times, mostly recently by Public Law 110-258. Citations to U.S. Code sections are provided.