

Presidential Elections

Core Facts

Presidential elections in the U.S. take place every four years and consist of two main stages: the **Primaries** and the **General Election**. These elections decide who will lead the executive branch of the U.S. government as **President**. The primaries determine the nominees for each political party, while the general election selects the President from among those nominees and other candidates.

Primary Elections

Primary elections allow political parties to **choose their candidate for the General Election**. Voters select delegates who represent them at the **party's national convention**, where the party's nominee is officially chosen.

Types of Primary Elections (vary by state)

- **Open Primary:** Voters can choose which party's primary to participate in, regardless of their own party affiliation. States like Michigan and Texas have open primaries, allowing any registered voter to cast a ballot in either the Democratic or Republican primary.
- **Closed Primary:** Only voters registered with a specific party can vote in that party's primary. States like New York and Florida have closed primaries, meaning only registered Democrats can vote in the Democratic primary, and only registered Republicans can vote in the Republican primary.
- **Semi-Closed Primary:** Voters registered with a party can only vote in their party's primary, but unaffiliated voters can choose which primary to vote in. States like Colorado and North Carolina use this system.
- **Caucuses:** Instead of a primary, some states hold caucuses, where party members meet to discuss and vote on their preferred candidate. Iowa is well known for its caucus system.

Typical Timing

Primary elections are held between February and June, depending on the state. Early primaries, such as those in Iowa and New Hampshire, are influential in narrowing the field of candidates and gaining momentum for the General Election.

How It Works by State

The rules governing primaries vary widely by state. Some states, like California, have a mix of open and closed systems, while others give full control to party leadership on how primaries are conducted. Additionally, the timing of primaries is set by each state, which is why the schedule for primaries stretches from February to June in the election year.

Impact Example

A state like Texas, with an open primary, allows independent voters to help choose a major party's candidate, potentially influencing which candidate gets the nomination. On the other hand, in closed primary states like Florida, only party members have a say in the selection process, maintaining more control over party decisions.

General Election

The General Election is where **voters decide between the candidates** from different political parties (or independents) to determine the **President of the United States**.

How It Works

The U.S. **does not elect** its president through a **direct popular vote**. Instead, it uses the **Electoral College system**, where voters in each state cast ballots for a slate of electors who are pledged to one of the presidential candidates. The electors then cast the official votes for the President and Vice President.

Popular Vote vs. Electoral College

While the popular vote reflects the total number of votes cast by individual voters across the nation, it does not directly decide the presidency. Instead, the outcome is determined by the Electoral College, which consists of 538 electors. Each state is allocated a certain number of electors based on its total number of Representatives and Senators in Congress.

How Number of Representatives and Senators Is Determined

The number of Representatives is determined by a state's population, with each state receiving at least one Representative, and the total number capped at 435. For example, California, the most populous state, has 52 Representatives, while a smaller state like Wyoming has just one. Each state also has two Senators, regardless of population, which provides smaller states with equal representation in the Senate.

Winner-Takes-All System

In all states except Maine and Nebraska, the candidate who wins the majority of the popular vote in a state receives all of that state's electoral votes. This 'winner-takes-all' approach means that a candidate can win the popular vote nationally but still lose the election if they do not secure enough electoral votes.

- Maine and Nebraska use a district system, where one electoral vote is awarded to the winner in each congressional district, and the remaining two electoral votes go to the statewide popular vote winner. This allows for a more proportional allocation of electoral votes in these states.

Majority Needed

To win the presidency, a candidate must secure a *majority of electoral votes—at least 270 out of the total 538.*

Election of the President

1. **Primaries:** Voters choose the candidates for each political party.
2. **Party Conventions:** Each party formally nominates its candidate.
3. **General Election:** Voters cast their ballots in November, whereby the announcement of who will win the next Presidential Election is made.
4. **Electoral College:** In December, the electors meet in their states to cast their votes based on the popular vote in their states.
5. **Certification:** In January, Congress certifies the Electoral College results.
6. **Inauguration:** On January 20th, the newly elected President is inaugurated and begins his or her term as President.