

# Guide to US Presidential Elections

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## Who Can Be President?

Requirements as mandated by the U.S. Constitution:

- Natural born US Citizen
- At least 35 years of age
- Resident for 14 years

## Running for the Office of President

### Political Parties and Primaries and Caucuses

#### *What are the different political parties?*

Traditionally, candidates for office of the Presidency of the United States have been represented by either the Republican (GOP) or Democratic Party. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of Independent candidates, and candidates from the Libertarian or Green Parties.

#### *How are candidates from different political parties chosen?*

Candidates, representing a particular political party, are typically chosen in a primary or caucus.

#### *What's the difference between a primary and a caucus?*

Primaries are a method of electing a candidate to represent a political party. A primary can be "open" (i.e., open to all registered voters who may vote for any candidate); "closed" (i.e., restricted to voters who are registered to the political party for which the election is being held); or "semi-closed" (i.e., restricted to voters who are registered to the political party for which the election is being held, but open to Independent voters).

Caucuses, unlike primaries, are not elections and instead are held through a series of smaller, local meetings. Support is shown by hand voting and usually only voters registered with the specific political party are allowed to participate.

#### *When are primaries and caucuses held?*

Political party primaries and caucuses are held from January to June of the year of the presidential election. This is the method by which voters in the 50 states, Washington, DC, and US territories select party delegates for their respective national conventions.

The primary and caucus season, while focusing on early states, to gain an advantage, comes in to full swing on "Super Tuesdays", days when a large number of states hold primaries or caucuses for one or both parties on the same day.

## **Nominating Conventions**

Each political party's nominating convention is the culmination of the primary and caucus battles that were waged from January to June. The delegates that were selected to represent a candidate during that process are pledged to support that candidate at the convention.

National party conventions are held in late summer (July, early August), typically about two and a half months before the election. Candidates are formally nominated by delegates representing the 50 states, Washington, DC and territories.

Delegates to the convention are state representative of the various primaries and caucuses. There are also "unpledged" or "super delegates" who are generally party leaders or elected officials. Each delegate or super delegate is entitled to one vote.

A Republican candidate must win 1,237 delegates to win a majority, and a Democratic candidate must have the support of 2,383 delegates to gain a majority.

Once a candidate has reached the required threshold majority, they are confirmed as the candidate of the political party and will represent that party in the general election.

After the selection of the candidate the convention is used a method of congratulating and promoting the candidate, announcing the vice-presidential candidate, and publicizing the candidate and party's message and themes for the election.

## **General Election Campaigning**

Once the candidates for the various political parties have been chosen, the focus shifts to the general election. Prior to the nominating convention, candidates are focused on reaching out to members of their political parties in order to gain the support of the nomination.

During the general election, with a known opponent from the opposing party there is a great influx of national advertising and campaign rallies. Also, nationally televised presidential debates are held, where candidates look to get their message out to the general public and to make their case for their candidacy.

As in many countries, there are some parts of the United States that are historically known to support a particular party. They are known to be reliably "red" (republican) or "blue" (democrat). But there are also some states that are called "battleground" states – they are "purple" (a mix of republican and democrat) – these are the states that could go either way during the election. During the final months and weeks of the presidential election much attention is focused on these states in an effort to turn the state either "blue" or "red." Phone banks are put in place, where potential supporters and voters are called in an effort to gain a pledge of support; voter registration drives are held, in an effort to register more voters; and canvassing is done, as means of personally reaching out supporters by visiting them at home.

## **Election of the President**

The election of the president of the United States of America is always held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November.

Voting is done either in person or by mail. Traditionally voters only voted on Election Day, now, however, there is a growing trend to allow an early voting period, where voters can go to centralized locations to cast their ballots prior to Election Day. Early voting can be for the convenience of the voter or as a means to vote absentee early.

The choice of each voter is reflected in the “popular vote.” But, the president is not elected by popular vote. Instead, the president is chosen by the Electoral College.

### ***What is the Electoral College?***

The Electoral College is comprised of 538 electors, representing each state, and the number of electors is based on the population of the state. The number of delegates is also equal to the number same number of congressional districts for each state, plus two senators. As an example large states like California and Texas, have 55 and 38 electors respectively, and smaller states like Vermont, and the District of Columbia, each only have 3 electors.

The first candidate to cross the Electoral College vote threshold of 270 is elected President of the United States. Generally speaking, the winner of the popular vote in a state, is awarded all of the delegates from that state, with two exceptions, Nebraska and Maine.

Electors generally vote for the candidate to which they are pledged, based on the popular vote results for their state. If an elector casts a vote against the instruction of its state delegation, they are labelled as “faithless electors.”

Electors are chosen by their respective political parties prior to the elections, typically at the national convention. Following Election Day, electors will meet in the capital of their state and cast their votes. The results of the Electoral College are announced on January 6 to the U.S. Senate. The new president is inaugurated on 20 January.

When the United States was first founded, it was not possible to have a national election, given the size, lack of widespread ability to communicate with one another, and the nascent nature of a “national” identity for a new country. The founding fathers did not want the president to be elected by Congress or purely by popular vote – as there was fear that larger states would have a disproportionate advantage to vote for their own candidates.

Although the concept of the Electoral College is confusing to some, in this country’s over 200-year history of presidential elections, there have only been 5 contested elections.

- 2016 Republican Donald J. Trump is elected president with 304 electoral votes, although Democrat Hilary Clinton had 2,864,903 more votes based on the popular vote
- 2000: Republican George W. Bush is elected president with 271 electoral votes, although Democrat Al Gore had 540,520 more votes based on the popular vote
- 1888: Republican Benjamin Harrison is elected president with 233 electoral votes, although Democrat Grover Cleveland had 100,456 more votes based on the popular vote
- 1876: Republican Rutherford B Hayes is elected president with 185 electoral votes, even though Democrat Samuel J Tilden had 264,292 more votes based on the popular vote
- 1824: Four candidates split the electoral college, and the House of Representative elected John Quincy Adams as president even though Andrew Jackson had amassed more electoral votes and popular vote

If no candidate receives a majority of Electoral College votes, then the 12th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, provides that the U.S. House of Representatives is to elect the president, and each state delegation is given a total of one vote. The Vice President would then be chosen by the Senate, with each senator having one vote.

## **Glossary Of Frequently Used Terms In Presidential Elections**

### **B**

**Ballot initiative:** If a petition is signed by a certain minimum number of registered, the petition is put to the voter as a proposed change to the law. If it gathers enough votes, the proposed change becomes law;

a means by which a petition signed by a certain minimum number of registered voters can bring about a public vote on a proposed statute or constitutional amendment.

**Battleground state:** A state where Democratic and Republican candidates both have a good chance of winning;

**Bellwether state:** A state that historically tends to vote for the winning candidate, perhaps because it has a population that is representative of the entire U.S. ,

**Blue state:** A state where people tend to vote for the Democratic Party.

### **C**

**Caucus:** A meeting of party members at which they select the candidates for election. In procedures that vary by state and party, participants in presidential caucuses meet in their local communities to choose which candidates they want to support. The caucuses allocate delegates based on the level of that support. The results are then tallied state-wide, and the candidate with the most delegates is said to win the state.

a meeting of members of a political party for the purpose of choosing candidates for an election

**Congress:** The legislative branch of the US government as prescribed in Article I of the US constitution. It is made up of two houses - the 435-member House of Representatives and 100-member Senate. Both houses have equal power. As well as drafting and implementing laws, Congress can also:

- Investigate matters of public concern
- Oversee federal agencies and their programmes
- Declare war
- Approve and ratify treaties
- Regulate commerce
- Increase and decrease taxes
- Print and appropriate money
- Confirm/approve judicial and federal appointments and nominations
- Impeach federal officials including the president and vice-president
- Override presidential vetoes based on a two-thirds majority in each chamber.

**Congressman/woman:** A member of the House of Representatives, typically. The term can refer to a member of the Senate.

**Constitution of the United States:** The fundamental and founding law of the US federal system of government. The US constitution and its 27 amendments establish the principal organs of government, their roles, and the basic rights of citizens. It is upheld as the supreme law of the land, meaning all federal and state laws, executive actions and judicial decisions must be consistent with it. The US constitution was ratified in 1788, and was most recently amended in 1992. It is the oldest written national constitution in effect.

## D

**Delegates:** Authorized party members sent to the national convention of their party to officially determine the party's presidential candidates;

a person sent or authorized to represent others, in particular an elected representative sent to a conference.

**Donkey, Democratic:** The donkey is the unofficial political symbol of the Democratic Party. The symbol was first used in the 1800s presidential campaign of Andrew Jackson.

## E

**Electoral College:** The 538 electors who officially elect the president and vice-president of the United States. A candidate must win 270 votes to win the president. Each state's number of votes is equal to the total of its senators and representatives in Congress;

a body of electors chosen by the voters in each state to elect the president and vice president of the U.S

**Elephant, Republican:** Like the donkey for the Democratic Party, the elephant is the unofficial symbol for the Republican party. It was first used during Abraham Lincoln's campaign.

**Election Assistance Commission:** The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) was established by the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). EAC is an independent, bipartisan commission charged with developing guidance to meet HAVA requirements, adopting voluntary voting system guidelines, and serving as a national clearinghouse of information on election administration. EAC also accredits testing laboratories and certifies voting systems, as well as audits the use of HAVA funds. Other responsibilities include maintaining the national mail voter registration form developed in accordance with the National Voter Registration Act of 1993. HAVA established the Standards Board and the Board of Advisors to advise EAC. The law also established the Technical Guidelines Development Committee to assist EAC in the development of voluntary voting system guidelines. The four EAC commissioners are appointed by the president and confirmed by the U.S. Senate. EAC is required to submit an annual report to Congress as well as testify periodically about HAVA progress and related issues. The commission also holds public meetings and hearings to inform the public about its progress and activities.

## F

**Federal Election Commission (FEC):** The Federal Election Commission was created in 1975 as an independent agency to administer elections and enforce election laws. The FEC discloses campaign finance information, enforces the law and oversees the public funding of presidential elections. By law, no more than three of the six members of the commission can be members of the same political party.

**Front-loading:** When a primary date is moved to the beginning of the presidential nomination period. This gives the primary more influence on the selection process;

a decision to move a primary date to the beginning (“front”) of the presidential nomination season.<sup>1</sup> State party leaders have moved their primary dates to the front so that their partisans may have more influence in the selection process.

## G

**Gerrymandering:** When the boundaries of a voting area are manipulated so that the voters favor one party, class, ethnic group, etc.;

manipulate the boundaries of (an electoral constituency) so as to favor one party or class.

**Grand Old Party (GOP):** The traditional nickname for the Republican Party. Green Party: A Green party is a formally organized political party based on the principles of “green politics”, such as social justice, environmentalism and nonviolence. The Green Party is one of the minor parties in American politics.

## H

**The House of Representatives:** The House is the larger of the two houses of Congress which are the law-making branches of government. The 435 members of the House - generally known as Congressmen and Congresswomen - serve two-year terms. The number of representatives each state gets is determined by the state’s population.

**House Majority Leader:** The House Majority Leader is the second most powerful member of the majority party in the House of Representatives. He or she focuses purely on advancing the interests of his or her party  
**House Minority Leader:** The leader of the minority party in the House of Representatives. He or she acts as a spokesperson for the minority party's policy position and organizes its legislative strategy.

## I

**Inauguration:** The ceremony that marks the start of the new president's term of office. Under the US constitution, this happens on 20 January of the year following the election.

**Independent:** Registered voters who have not declared a party affiliation.

## L

**Libertarian:** A voter whose concerns are driven by belief in a small government, fiscal conservative ideas and notions of individual liberty.

## N

**National convention:** The party specific assembly held every four years. At each party's convention, state delegates nominate the party's candidates for president and vice president. The candidates are usually chosen during the primary process, but are formally nominated here.

## P

**Primary:** A state-level election held to nominate a party's candidate for office. Each state has specific rules for how they are held.

**Purple state:** Another term for a swing state. A state which could vote Democratic (blue) or Republican (red).

## R

**Red state:** A state where people tend to vote for the Republican Party.

**Running mate:** The presidential nominee's candidate for the vice-presidency.

## S

**Senate:** The upper house of Congress. The Senate has 100 elected members, two from each state, serving six-year terms. **Senate Majority Leader:** The leader of the majority party in the Senate, and the most powerful member of the upper house of Congress. He or she controls the daily legislative programme and decides on the time allowed for debates.

**Senate Minority Leader:** The leader of the minority party in the Senate. He or she acts as a figurehead for the minority party in the Senate, articulating its policy positions and attempting to deliver its legislative priorities.

**Senator:** Member of the Senate, the upper house of Congress. Each US state has two (a junior and a senior senator, distinguished by length of service).

**Speaker of the House:** The leader of the majority party in the House of Representatives - not to be confused with the House Majority Leader. The House Speaker has a dual role as both the leader of his or her party in the House, and as the presiding officer in the chamber, with responsibility for controlling debate and setting the legislative agenda.

**Supermajority:** The vote margin of two-thirds or three-quarters of the quorum, as opposed to a simple majority of 50% plus one.

**Super Tuesday:** The day in the campaign calendar, usually in February or early March of an election year, when a large number of states hold primary elections.

**Swing states:** States in which the voters are relatively evenly split between Republicans and Democrats.

## T

***Third-party candidate:*** A candidate who does not belong to one of the two main US political parties, the Republicans or the Democrats.

## V

***Vice-President:*** The presiding officer of the US Senate and the person who assumes the office of the president in the event of the resignation, removal, incapacitation or death of the incumbent president.