

Election of the President & Vice President: Primary Election

According to the United States Constitution, a presidential election is to be held once every fourth year. The process of electing a President and Vice-President begins long before Election Day. Candidates from both major and minor political parties and independent candidates begin to raise money and campaign at least one year in advance of the general presidential election. In order to officially represent a political party, a candidate must be nominated by that party.

The nominating process officially begins with the first state primaries and caucuses, which usually occur in the month of February of the election year. It is at these local events that voters are given their first chance to participate in electing the nation's next President.

There are many factors that influence who will ultimately become the candidate for a party. The public's perception of the candidates is influenced by such things as media reports, public opinion polls, candidate preference surveys, and advertising.

The spring of an election year is characterized by intense campaigning for primaries and caucuses all over the nation. This process reaches its peak at the national conventions of the political parties. Once at the national party conventions, the delegates from the states cast votes for the person who will represent the political party in the November general election. In order to secure a party's nomination, a candidate must receive a majority of the votes from the delegates. It is not unusual for delegates to vote several times before one candidate secures the majority of the votes and officially becomes that party's candidate for the election to determine the next President of the United States. The candidate for President then must choose a vice-presidential candidate.

If a President is running for re-election, this nomination process must be completed. Even if the President does not have any opponents from within his own political party, the national convention will still occur. The conventions are extravaganzas, full of pageantry and showmanship. They serve to help jump start the general election campaign for the presidential candidates.

The primary election process ends with the national conventions of the political parties. Once the national conventions have been held, and the candidates from the political parties have been nominated and chosen, the presidential election begins in earnest as a contest between the candidates from the political parties.

Some people choose to run for president without being affiliated with a political party. Such independent candidates need not concern themselves with getting nominated by a party, but must meet other requirements. For example, such candidates are required to collect a large number of signatures to support their nominations. The sources of funding used by independent candidates comes from personal funds and loans as well as fundraising campaigns.

The candidates campaign right up until Election Day, when the nation finally votes for its President. The candidates travel throughout the country, making public appearance and giving speeches. The parties and the candidates use media advertising, direct mailings, telephone campaigns, and other means to persuade the voters to choose one candidate over the other(s). Often, these measures also serve to point out the weaknesses of the candidates from the other parties involved in the general election.

In this national presidential election, every citizen of legal age (who has taken the steps necessary in his/her state to meet the voting requirements, such as registering to vote) has an opportunity to vote. However, the President is not chosen by direct popular vote. The Constitution requires that a process known as the Electoral College ultimately decides who will win the general election.

The Electoral College is a method of indirect popular election of the President of the United States. The authors of the Constitution put this system in place so that careful and calm deliberation would lead to the selection of the best-qualified candidate. Voters in each state actually cast a vote for a block of electors who are pledged to vote for a particular candidate. These electors, in turn, vote for the presidential candidate. The number of electors for each state equals its Congressional representation.

After Election Day, on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December, these electors assemble in their state capitals, cast their ballots, and officially select the next President of the United States. Legally, the electors may vote for someone other than the candidate for whom they were pledged to vote. This phenomenon is known as the “unfaithful” or “faithless” elector. Generally, this does not happen. Therefore, the candidate who receives the most votes in a state at the general election will be the candidate for whom the electors later cast their votes. The candidate who wins in a state is awarded all of that state’s Electoral College votes. Maine and Nebraska are exceptions to this winner-take-all rule.

The votes of the electors are then sent to Congress where the President of the Senate opens the certificates, and counts the votes. This takes place on January 6, unless that date falls on a Sunday. In that case, the votes are counted on the next day. An absolute majority is necessary to prevail in the presidential and the vice presidential elections, that is, half the total plus one electoral votes are required. With 538 Electors, a candidate must receive at least 270 votes to be elected to the office of President or Vice President.

Should no presidential candidate receive an absolute majority, the House of Representatives determines who the next president will be. Each state may cast one vote and an absolute majority is needed to win. Similarly, the Senate decides who the next Vice President will be if there is no absolute majority after the Electoral College vote. Elections have been decided by Congress in the past. The House of Representatives elected Thomas Jefferson president in the election of 1800 when the Electoral College vote resulted in a tie. When the Electoral College vote was so split that none of the candidates received an absolute majority in the election of 1824 the House elected John Quincy Adams President. Richard Johnson was elected Vice President by the Senate when he failed to receive an absolute majority of electoral votes in the election of 1836.

The President-elect and Vice President-elect take the oath of office and are inaugurated two weeks later, on January 20th.

Election of Representatives

When the first Congress met in 1789, there were 59 representatives in the House of Representatives. As the number of states increased and as the population grew, the number of representatives increased significantly. A law passed in 1911 fixed the size of the House of Representatives at 435 members. Members of the House are up for reelection every two years. The number of persons representing each state depends upon its population as reported in the nation’s decennial census counts. Each state is divided into congressional districts accordingly. There is a representative for every congressional district and every state has at least one congressional district.

In order to be elected to the House of Representatives one must be at least 25 years old by the time one takes the oath of office, a citizen of the U.S. for at least seven years, and a resident of the state from which one is elected. These qualifications were established in Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution.

Most states have primary elections to decide which candidates will be on the November general election ballot. Some states parties hold conventions in conjunction with the primary. If a candidate is unopposed, there may not be a primary election. Those who represent a major political party are automatically placed on a state’s primary ballot. Minor party candidates are chosen by their party’s rules while independent candidates nominate themselves. Independent candidates and those representing minor parties must meet various state requirements to be placed on the general election ballot. An example of this would be to submit a petition with a certain number of registered voters.

Senate and Representative elections differ in who votes for the candidates. All eligible voters within a state may vote for Senator. A Representative is elected by only those eligible voters residing in the congressional district that the candidate will represent. Election winners are decided by the plurality rule. That is, the person who receives the highest number of votes wins. This may not necessarily be a majority of the votes.