

# Issue Overview: How the U.S. elects its presidents

By Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.27.16

Word Count **554**

Level **620L**



TOP: Voters head to the polls on Super Tuesday during the primaries. Photo by Alex Wong. MIDDLE: The green papers, Federal Election Commission. BOTTOM: The Electoral College and Swing States in the 2016 election, Federal Election Commission.

To be president of the United States, you need only three things. First, you have to be at least 35 years old. Second, you must have lived in the states for 14 years. And third, you must have been born a U.S. citizen. Becoming president, though, isn't so easy. Americans have the longest, most expensive and most complicated way of choosing a leader. Even Americans themselves are confused by it.

## The Situation

Americans choose their president every four years. Election Day is in November. The choice is between two candidates. One is a Republican and one is a Democrat.

Each state has smaller state-level elections. That is how the two candidates are chosen. Some states hold primaries. In a primary, voters mark their votes on ballots. Other states hold caucuses. At a state caucus, voters raise their hands or bunch together in one part of a room to vote.

Then, each state chooses delegates. These delegates are sent to the Democratic and Republican conventions. Delegates represent their state's support for a certain candidate. Conventions are huge events. They are a chance for people to cheer on the candidate they like.

## The Background

The U.S. has had an elected president since 1789. Every president since Abraham Lincoln in 1860 has been a Republican or Democrat. There are other parties, too. The other parties are much smaller, though. It is very hard for these candidates to become president.

The strangest part of the contest is the Electoral College. When the U.S. was founded, some people wanted a popular vote by the people. Others wanted lawmakers to pick the president. The Electoral College was supposed to be a mix of both.

Every state gets one Electoral College vote for every seat it has in Congress. Whichever candidate wins the most votes in each state on Election Day gets all of that state's Electoral College votes. This is called "winner take all." Only Maine and Nebraska don't do this. Then, the Electoral College picks the president.

## The Argument

The winner-take-all system is not perfect. Sometimes the Electoral College picks a president who did not win the most votes overall. This happened in 2000. Republican George W. Bush beat Democrat Al Gore. Bush became president. But Gore had more of the popular vote.

The Electoral College makes candidates pay extra attention to a few states. These states have not made up their mind. They could help either candidate in the Electoral College vote. They are called "swing states."

Other states' electoral votes usually turn out the same. For example, California votes Democratic. Texas votes Republican. Candidates don't visit these states as often. They expect them to vote the same way they always do.

# DEFINITIONS

## convention

A big meeting where members of a political party decide who they want to run for president

## delegate

Representatives chosen to show support for their party's candidate on behalf of their state

## popular vote

The total number of votes cast by citizens in an election

### The Looooong Path to the White House

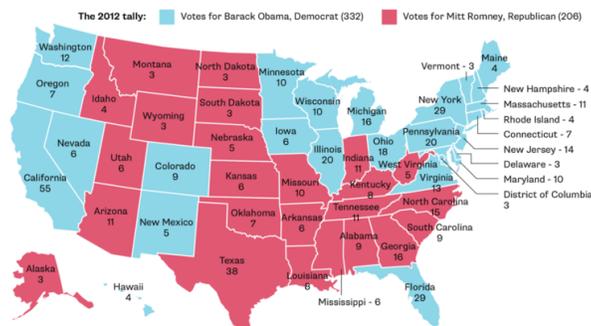
Partial list of events in the 2016 presidential election

<b>2015</b> <b>Aug. 6</b> First debate among Republican contenders (13 are scheduled). <b>Oct. 13</b> First debate among Democratic contenders (10 are scheduled).	Primaries: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia. <b>March 5</b> Caucuses: Kansas, Kentucky Republicans, Maine Republicans, Nebraska Democrats. Primary: Louisiana. <b>March 6</b> Caucus: Maine Democrats. Primary: Puerto Rico Republicans. <b>March 8</b> Caucus: Hawaii Republicans. Primaries: Idaho Republicans, Mississippi, Michigan. <b>March 15</b> Primaries: Florida, Illinois, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio. <b>March 22</b> Caucuses: Idaho Democrats, Utah. Primary: Arizona. <b>March 29</b> Democratic caucuses: Alaska, Hawaii, Washington. <b>April 5</b> Wisconsin primary. <b>April 19</b> New York primary.	<b>April 26; May 3, 10, 17 and 24; June 7</b> Other primaries. <b>June 14</b> District of Columbia Democratic primary – the last one. <b>July 18-21</b> Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio. <b>July 25-28</b> Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. <b>Sept. 28</b> First presidential debate. <b>Oct. 4</b> Vice presidential debate. <b>Oct. 9</b> Second presidential debate. <b>Oct. 19</b> Third presidential debate. <b>Nov. 8</b> Election day nationwide. <b>Dec. 19</b> Electoral College vote.
<b>2016</b> <b>Feb. 1</b> Iowa caucus. <b>Feb. 9</b> New Hampshire primary. <b>Feb. 20</b> Caucuses: Nevada Democrats, Washington Republicans. Primary: South Carolina Republicans. <b>Feb. 23</b> Nevada Republican caucus. <b>Feb. 27</b> South Carolina Democratic primary. <b>March 1</b> "Super Tuesday." Caucuses: Alaska Republicans, Colorado Democrats, Minnesota, Wyoming Republicans.	<b>2017</b> <b>Jan. 20</b> Inauguration Day – new president sworn in.	

### The Electoral College

There are 538 Electoral College votes, which are apportioned based on how many senators and House representatives each state has. The District of Columbia, which is not part of any state, was awarded three electoral votes in 1961.

Candidates need 270 votes to win the presidency. If no candidate receives a majority, the House of Representatives elects the president from the three candidates who received the most electoral votes.



People who want to change this system say that just a few states actually pick the president. Others think it keeps candidates from ignoring small states. Most agree that the way campaigns spend money is a waste. They spend most of it on ads.

Some people really like following politics. They are the real winners of the election process.

### **Update**

Republican Donald Trump was elected president on November 8, 2016. He won important "swing states." These included North Carolina, Ohio and Florida. Democrat Hillary Clinton won the popular vote. She won the most votes in total.

