

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

By Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.27.16

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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 able to become president of the United States, you need only three things: You must be at least 35 years old, have lived in the U.S. for at least 14 years and have been born a U.S. citizen. Not much else about becoming president is simple. Americans have the longest, most expensive and possibly most complicated way of choosing a leader. And, at the end of it all, the person who gets the most votes can still lose. It's a system that confuses both non-Americans and Americans.

The Situation

Americans choose their president in November once every four years. The two candidates, one Republican and one Democrat, must first make it through a string of smaller state-level elections. Some states hold primaries, where people vote by ballot as usual. Others hold caucuses, where voters raise their hand or bunch together in one spot of a room. Primaries and caucuses are held from February to June.

Then, each state chooses delegates to send to the Democratic and Republican conventions. They show support for their party's candidate on behalf of their state. Democrats also have special "superdelegates." These delegates are allowed to support any candidate, no matter how their state voted.

Over time, conventions have become huge TV events. They serve as chances to cheer on the possible next president and vice president. But sometimes no single candidate wins most of the delegates before his or her party's convention. In that case, rounds of votes are held until most of the delegates agree on a nominee. This is called a contested convention.

The Background

The U.S. has had an elected president since the Constitution went into effect in 1789. Since Abraham Lincoln won the job in 1860, every president has been either a Republican or Democrat. Candidates from other parties have a hard time getting enough support to be on the state ballot in November. The most successful third-party candidate was former President Theodore Roosevelt. He ran in 1912.

The strangest part of the contest is the Electoral College. It was meant to be a compromise between those who wanted a direct popular vote by the people and those who wanted lawmakers to pick the president. Every state gets one Electoral College vote for every seat it has in Congress. This makes smaller states more important. In the early 19th century, some states adopted a winner-take-all approach. Whichever candidate wins the most votes in one of these states on Election Day gets all of that state's Electoral College votes. Maine and Nebraska are the only states that don't do this. They give one electoral vote to the winner of each region, or district, and two electoral votes to whoever wins the state overall.

The Argument

The winner-take-all system has caused the Electoral College to choose presidents who did not win the overall vote. This happened in 2000, when Republican George W. Bush beat Democrat Al Gore. Some people want the total tally of ballots to decide who wins the election. But small states would lose power in that system, so they don't want to change.

The Electoral College forces candidates to mostly pay attention to states where there is likely to be a close race. They are often called "swing states." This is because the other states' electoral votes can be taken for granted. For example, California usually votes Democratic. Texas tends to vote Republican. Candidates don't want to waste time campaigning in states that don't support their party anyway.

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

People who dislike this system argue that just a few states actually pick the president. The Electoral College's defenders say that small states would otherwise be ignored. Most agree that the way campaigns spend money is a problem. In the 2016 election, each party spent more than \$1 billion by Election Day. Most of it was spent on advertising. The real winners include television stations that make money from campaign commercials. Them, and the citizens who love to follow politics.

Update

Republican Donald Trump was elected president on November 8, 2016, after winning important "swing states" like North Carolina, Ohio and Florida. Democrat Hillary Clinton won the most votes nationwide.



The Looooong Path to the White House

Partial list of events in the 2016 presidential election

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

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.

