

# 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 just three things: You must be at least 35 years old, have lived in the U.S. for at least 14 years and to be born a U.S. citizen. However, not much else about becoming president is simple. Americans have the world's longest, most expensive and possibly most complicated system 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 baffles non-Americans — and many Americans, too.

## The Situation

Every four years, Americans select a president on a Tuesday in November. The two major candidates, one Republican and one Democrat, will have survived a long series of state-level contests. Each state holds either a primary (votes by ballot) or a caucus (votes by a show of hands or by clustering all the candidate's supporters in one place in the room). These initial elections are held from February through June.

Then, each state selects delegates to send to the Democratic and Republican conventions. There, delegates translate the popular votes into support for their party's November candidate. Democrats also have so-called "superdelegates" who are allowed to back any candidate, regardless of how their states voted.

In recent years, conventions have become made-for-TV spectacles. They serve as chances to cheer on the nominee and his or her would-be vice president. But if no candidate wins a majority of the delegates beforehand, something called a contested convention occurs. At a contested convention, rounds of votes are taken until a majority agrees on a nominee. While most delegates vote the way their state did in the first round of votes, on later rounds they can vote any way they'd like.

### **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. Third-party candidates have a hard time getting on state ballots for the November general election. They have never done better than former Republican President Theodore Roosevelt, who ran on the Bull Moose Party ticket in 1912.

The quirkiest part of the contest is the Electoral College, which was created by the nation's founders as a compromise between those who favored a direct popular vote by the people and those who wanted lawmakers to pick the president. Every state gets as many Electoral College votes as it has members of Congress, which amplifies the importance of small states. In the early 19th century, some states adopted a winner-take-all approach. This system awards all Electoral College votes to whichever candidate wins the most votes in that state on Election Day. Maine and Nebraska are the only unique cases. They award one electoral vote to the winner of each congressional district and two electoral votes to the statewide winner.

### **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. After such an election, there is a renewed push to make the total tally of ballots decide who wins. But small states would lose power in that system, and are unwilling to switch.

Some states' electoral votes can be taken for granted. For example, California usually votes Democratic. Texas tends to vote Republican. The Electoral College forces candidates to mostly campaign in a few "swing states." These are states where there is likely to be a close race.

## 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

Critics of the system argue that just a handful of states actually decide the election. Defenders say that small states and rural areas would otherwise be overlooked. Most agree, though, that money plays too big a role in campaigns. In the 2016 election, each party spent more than \$1 billion by Election Day. Most of it was spent on advertising. The real winners in this long process also include local television stations that make money from campaign ads and citizens who love to watch the political drama unfold.

## Update

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

